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HUMAN DEVELOPMENT

Volume 38 Fall 2017



SAVED TOGETHER

"No Community, No Saving Lord"

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Human Development Magazine is a quarterly publication for people involved in the work of fostering the human and spiritual growth of others. This includes persons involved in religious leadership and formation, spiritual direction, pastoral care, education, counseling healthcare and those interested in the development of the whole person.

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Letters to the editor and all other correspondence may be sent to:

HUMAN DEVELOPMENT MAGAZINE

E-mail: editor@hdmag.org

Phone: 1-877-545-0557

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LETTER FROM THE EDITOR

Fall 2017

Dear friends of Human Development Magazine,

I am delighted to share with you our fall 2017 issue entitled "Saved Together."

Most of us in ministry or those who have grown up practicing the faith regularly use words like salvation or redemption as a regular part of our vocabulary; we presume these words have meaning in the general populace. Every once in awhile, someone will startle us with the challenging question: "Explain how salvation works? What does it mean anyway? From what do I need to be saved?" Very often, well-intentioned people have a sense that salvation happens when one gets baptized or responds to an altar call. Our definition of salvation often sounds rather formal, even mechanical: Christ saved us by dying for our sins. But in a world where we do not speak much of sin, does that traditional formula still connect with people?

In view of these struggles for those in ministry and the many individuals who are not even sure what they seek or need, it seemed appropriate to dedicate one of our issues to the theme "saved together." Such a phrase – saved together – is a necessary part of the healing so many people need to experience as they face addiction, violence and depression. More than ever, we need communities of faith; it is in and through them that we discover, share and celebrate salvation.

I took it upon myself to write the lead essay for the issue that tries to delineate the questions that confront us with regard to salvation and the Church. I placed a particular emphasis on the fact that we are saved not just by the cross but by the loving obedient way Christ died. His obedience flows through us when we are empty of self and open to sharing all of our gifts, talents and resources with and for others. In saving others, "accidentally" we ourselves are saved!

Jeff Jay, a member of our Editorial Board and a seasoned addiction therapist, has written a piece that is the perfect companion to my introductory essay. He describes the 12 Step Process as a journey "from I-to-we." His thoughts and examples are very compelling; he explains very concretely that we cannot be saved in isolation! In fact, addiction is about living in our own "private hell."

Since Father Solanus Casey, OFM Cap., is on the brink of being beatified, it seemed appropriate to have an essay on his spirituality. Obviously, he embodies a strong commitment to the corporate aspect of salvation. Father Larry Webber, a Capuchin who played a very significant role in the process of Fr. Solanus' movement toward

beatification, has written a beautiful essay which notes three things that characterized Fr. Solanus: love of God, love of neighbor and sacrifice of self.

Bishop Richard Sklba, retired Auxiliary of Milwaukee, has written a very poetic and challenging essay in which he speaks about the challenges and opportunities of dialogue and prayer with other Christians, particularly as we celebrate the 500th anniversary of Martin Luther and his famous 95 theses.

The well-known Trappist author Thomas Keating offers a short reflective piece on centering prayer and how it can be a means of coming to deeper communion with God and others.

Janet Diaz, on the faculty of Sacred Heart Major Seminary in Lay Ministry Formation, offers a reflection on spirituality for families. Clearly families are a premier example of how we are "saved together!"

Father Samuel Wells, once Chaplain at Duke University and now Vicar at St. Martin in the Fields in London, has written a very engaging piece about rethinking how the Church carries out its missionary vocation. His stories are very compelling and his questions penetrating.

Dominican Sister Geri Kline has written an extremely moving essay about her own journey through depression and how she experienced salvation. Her story could be the story of any one of us.

As in most of the issues, I have attached a meditation piece which I entitled "A Prayerful Reflection for a Deeper Communion with the Church." It could serve as a Penance Service or for personal reflection on a retreat.

Finally, as you may notice in our editorial pictures, after many years of service with us, Bob Koval has gone on to other adventures and Jeff Heinrich, the new CEO of Guest House, has joined our Editorial Board. He brings with him many years of service as a therapist and will be a welcome voice at the table.

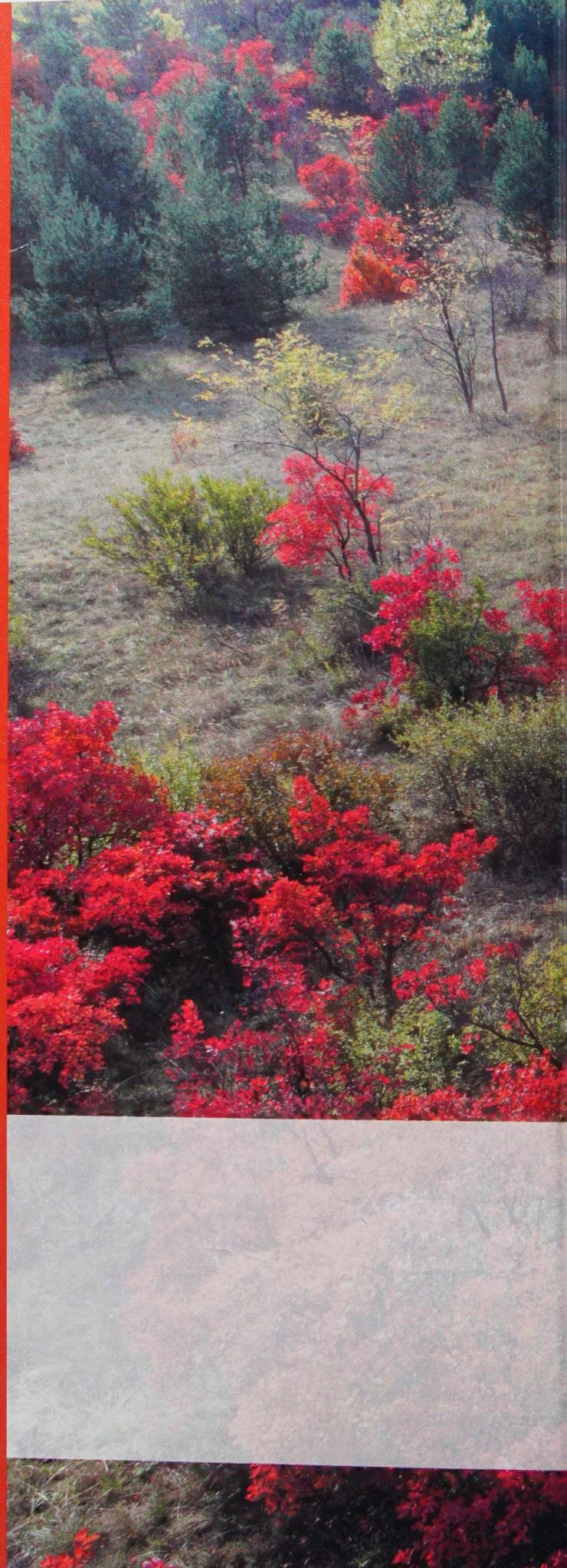
With thanks for your support of Human Development Magazine and encouraging you to invite others to join our enterprise I remain,

Your brother in the Lord,

Msgr. John P. Zeng

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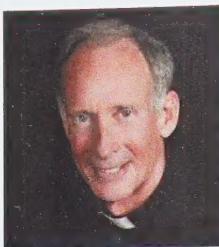
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“To Him who loves us and has freed us from our sins by His blood, who has made us into a kingdom, priests for His God and Father, to Him be glory and power forever. Amen.” (Revelation 1:5-6)

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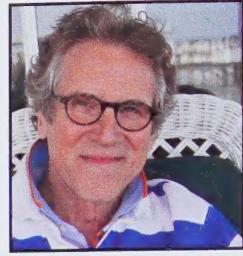
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January 8-11, 2018
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January 18-21, 2018
Guest House Alumnae Winter Retreat
DiamondHead Resort
Fort Myers Beach, FL

April 9-11, 2018
Guest House Alumni Retreat
Capuchin Retreat Center
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May 2-4, 2018
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Guest House Scripps
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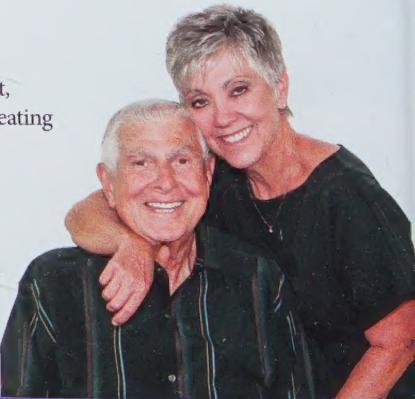
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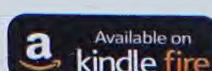
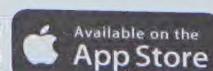
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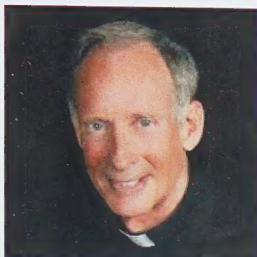
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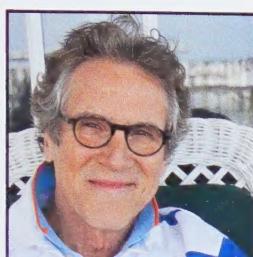
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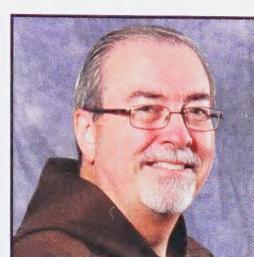
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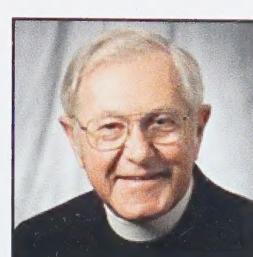
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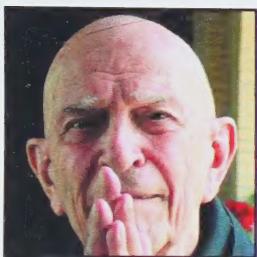
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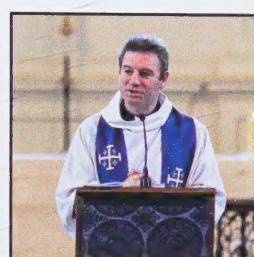
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INFORMATION FOR AUTHORS

The editors of Human Development are quite eager to publish articles that translate the latest research in psychology, health, medicine, and spirituality to ministry, formation and practice. Our hope is that Human Development will be known as the most user-friendly ministry publication. This will require making complicated theoretical knowledge, research, and concepts understandable and applicable to the personal and professional lives of our readers.

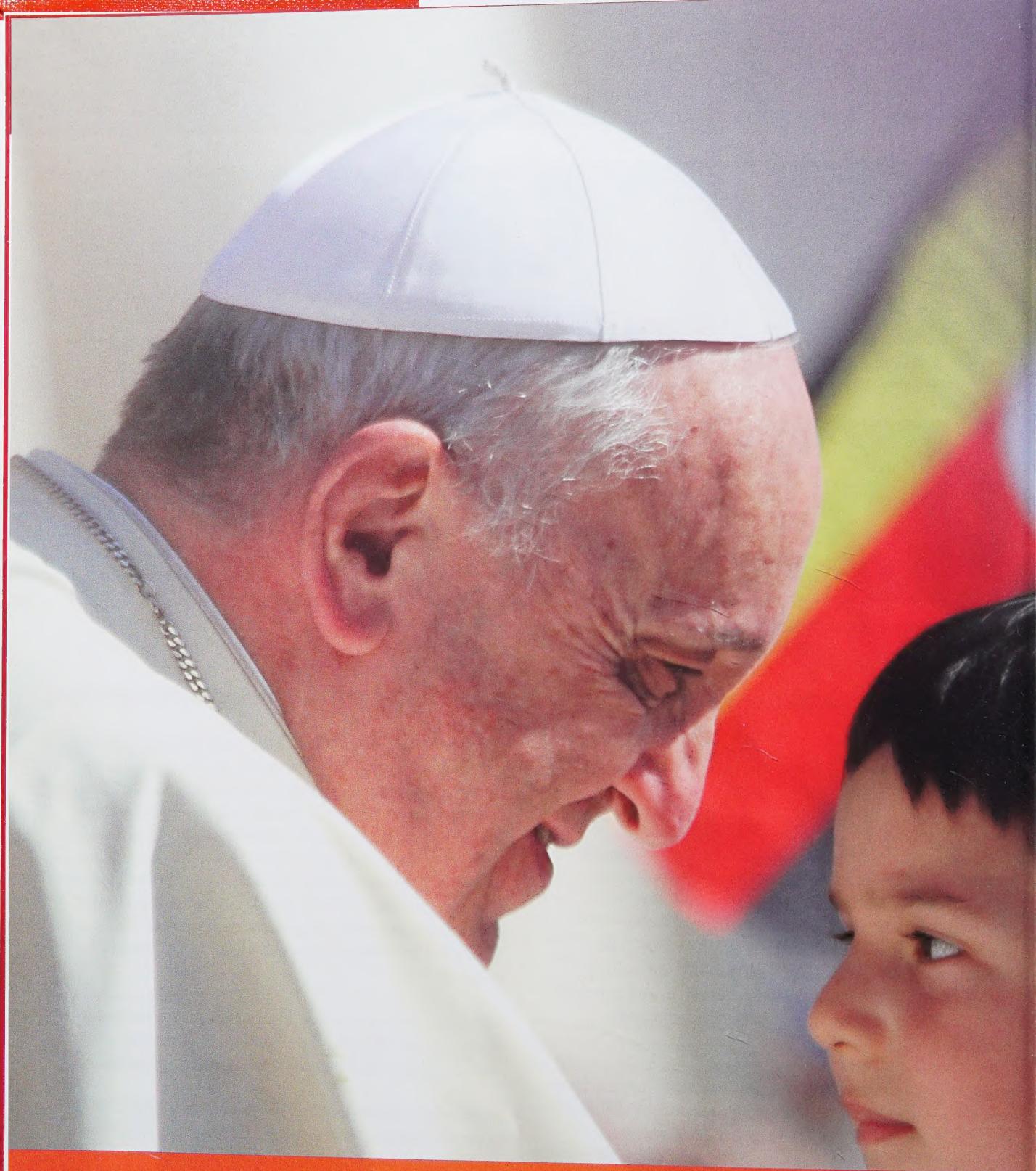
Since ministry is in a time of significant transition and change, we anticipate that the articles we publish will enlighten and positively influence the daily decisions and practices of those in Church leadership, ministry formation, spiritual direction, and counseling of any kind. There are also a number of previously under-appreciated forces that uniquely influence ministry and ministers: cultural, organizational, and situational factors. We intend to highlight and honor these factors in the pages of Human Development. Accordingly, we ask prospective authors to be mindful of these considerations in their manuscripts.

Manuscripts are received with the understanding that they have not been previously published and are not currently under consideration elsewhere. Feature articles should be limited to 4,500 words (15 double-spaced pages), with no more than six recommended citations and/or readings; filler items of between 500 and 1,000 words will be considered. All accepted material is subject to editing. When quoting sacred scripture, the New Revised Standard Version is preferred. All manuscripts are to be prepared according to the Publication Manual of the American Psychological Association (6th edition).

Letters are welcome and will be published as space permits and at the discretion of the editors. Such communications should not exceed 600 words and are subject to editing.

Authors are responsible for the completeness and accuracy of proper names in both text and Bibliography/suggested readings. Acknowledgments must be given when substantial material is quoted from other publications. Provide author name(s), title of article, title of journal or book, volume number, page(s), month and year, and publisher's permission to use material.

Manuscripts should be submitted to Msgr. John Zenz at editor@hdmag.org as an email attachment.



FROM ONE COMMUNION TO ANOTHER

Msgr. John Zenz



PROLOGUE

Who of us has not been confronted many times over the years with the eager, hopeful and concerned voice of a zealous believer:

“Have you been saved?”

“Have you declared Jesus your personal Saviour?”

How should one answer?

A simple yes? An honest, “I hope so but I’m still in process?”

What does it mean to “be saved?”

Do we need the Church for salvation?

This essay seeks to respond to such questions, spelling out implications for our own spiritual maturity and how we might accompany others on the journey of salvation. Salvation “happens” as we encounter Jesus as the Christ. A relationship with the Lord is an experience of communion between us, a communion that brings wholeness. But note: this “wholeness” necessarily means an ever deepening immersion in the “Communion of Saints,” the Church. We are not saved through some sort of private confession of Jesus apart from a community of faith.

Perhaps a simple story from a recent ministerial experience can foreshadow what I hope to develop in this essay. As I prepared my homily for the funeral of a 90 year-old retired executive, I was blessed that he had written his own testimony of faith in which he said he had many times been “saved from himself” by his wife’s steady love. Christ has saved us and continues to save us through others, with others and for others. Consider for example the story of the paralytic in Mark 2 lowered through the roof by his four friends who had carried him to Jesus: were not all five of them changed by the encounter? As the Catechism of the Catholic Church reminds us, we know the Lord through the Church: “Faith is a personal act ...but not an isolated act. No one can believe alone just as no one can live alone. You have not given yourself faith as you have not given yourself life. ...Each believer is thus a link in the great chain of believers. I cannot believe without being carried by the faith of others, and by my faith I help support others in the faith.” (art. 166)

How do we balance intimacy with the Lord and loving relationships with others? The challenge Christians face in every time and culture is the tendency to head toward one extreme or the other – i.e. an “individualized” sense of salvation/relationship with Jesus versus a spirituality that is primarily communal. Furthermore, at times, we can fall into the habit of thinking of these two

ways of understanding salvation as parallel “tracks” that overlap at certain times and places such as the celebration of the Eucharist. Even when we pray privately, we do so as a member of the Church and our personal prayer is fulfilled in the prayer of the Church, the Eucharist.

From my pastoral perspective I share concerns prophetically articulated by Romano Guardini a century ago as he detected an overly individualistic sense of spirituality, a loss of a truly ecclesial spirituality of communion. He noted that this has been a growing trend in the Church since the late Middle Ages, and most especially in the last century:

“I and my Creator” was the only formula for many. Community was not the origin, but something secondary. It was not there from the outset, but was planned, desired, created. This was not community, but organization: as everywhere else, so also in the religious sphere. How little did believers at worship consider themselves a community! How loose were the internal ties! How little was the individual conscious of the parish! How individualistically was “communion,” the sacrament of community, understood!

(As quoted and translated in Gerhard Lohfink, *Does God Need the Church?* p 313)

This essay seeks to present a “spirituality of communion,” a primary message of the Council Fathers of Vatican II (both in their Decrees and Constitutions and also in their methodology itself). “Spirituality of Communion” is also an excellent means of explaining our rich but complex theology of “salvation.” I concur wholeheartedly with the insight of the late Henri Nouwen:

I’m profoundly convinced that the greatest spiritual danger for our times is the separation of Jesus from the Church. The Church is the body of the Lord. Without Jesus there can be no Church; and without the Church we cannot stay united to



Jesus. I've yet to meet anyone who has come closer to Jesus by forsaking the Church.

(Henri Nouwen, Jesus: A Gospel. p 71)

SPIRITUALITY OF COMMUNION

The faith journey of intimacy with the glorified Lord and His Body the Church is a life-long process of moving “from one communion to another.” By this phrase I mean more than just a “series” of communions, for example, Sunday after Sunday. Communion on one level (being part of presbyterate, religious congregation, family or parish) takes us deeper and deeper into the Communion of Saints and ultimately the Trinitarian Communion.

“Communion” is a most apt word to describe the journey into salvific relationship with God and each other. Communion is the origin of the journey and its ultimate goal: from Trinitarian love and back to the Trinitarian Communion of love in a conscious, and free manner. Communion is also the means to reaching salvation since “communion” means “sharing of gifts.” At all stages of this transforming and renewing process, communion is never “fusion” but rather giving and receiving without the individual losing his/her unique identity. The Pleroma or fullness of the Risen Christ is completed

as each one of us is immersed in the mystery and process of divine love. (cf. Colossians 1:24).

Our communion is a reflection and expression of the Trinity; their perfect mutuality of love-in-relationship is the very reason we have the desire and ability to live in communion. Our experience of sharing in divine communion of life is the result of a process of self-sacrifice, a letting go of ego defenses and a choice to live totally-for-other. Even liturgically, communion comes near the end of the Eucharist; it is the result of our sacrifice and Christ’s sacrifice joined as one. And very importantly, communion is not static; as we see with the Trinity, communion expresses itself in mission and service which draws others into the experience. There must always be yet another communion.

SALVATION DISCOVERED IN COMMUNITY

In a subtle but nonetheless clear way as a Eucharistic Minister to the homebound, I quickly learned that taking communion to the homebound was not just a matter of offering them the Eucharistic presence of Christ; they also longed to enjoy the “real presence” of a visitor!

Most have somehow developed a subtle but deep conviction that “spirituality” has to do with one’s individual “soul” before God. When asked about a “relationship” with God, many imagine silent hours in a retreat house along a rocky coastline where we can be “alone with the Alone.” Communal aspects of spirituality are often thought of as an optional extension of one’s encounter with the Lord, a choice to share with others the intimacy we have discovered.

In truth, our need to be saved and our need for communion with others are two sides of one same reality: We cannot understand or even begin to explain Jesus/salvation unless we also experience the gift-in-progress through meaningful relationships in the Church. The Council Fathers of Vatican II made this point very forcefully throughout their Dogmatic Constitutions and Decrees, especially in the oft-quoted line from the Dogmatic Constitution on the Church: “It has pleased God to make us holy and save us not merely as individuals without any mutual bounds, but by making us into a single people...” (art. 9)

The culture in which we live often militates against a commitment to community. We have been raised to think of ourselves as free, independent individuals who choose to enter into relationships and communities when it is relatively risk-free, convenient and suits our purposes. Likewise, the thought of “needing” to be saved does not resonate well: we prefer to handle things on our own and seek the help of others – even God - only when absolutely necessary! We are not comfortable with admitting physical, psychological or spiritual limitations and we are slow to accept the listening ear or helping

hand of another, even a parent, sibling, cherished friend or counselor.

How can we learn to trust that our “need” for communion with the Lord and each other is actually something healthy, natural and good? As in most aspects of life, theological reasoning will not convince us of our need for “salvation.” We learn by way of experience – usually painful ones of loss, loneliness, failure and rejection. Until we face “darkness” we continue to be content with the artificial light of this world; we “wake up” to salvation as we admit our need for communion with others and with God.

Perhaps we could describe this mysterious process of “salvation” this way: in our “fallen” world, human life is a process of “recovery” from our fear of loving and being loved. In part, the root for our uneasiness with salvation and its communal dimensions can be traced to our mistaken notion of God. Sons and daughters of Adam and Eve, we presume that God must be about control. But the Scriptures clearly portray that God is love; He rejoices in relationships and is willing to express vulnerability. If we truly appreciated the relational qualities of the God of love, we would begin to see that our bond with Him could never possibly be a discrete, individualized arrangement.

Salvation is a lifelong process of dying to the “world” as we know it and breathing in the liberating fresh air of Christ’s risen spirit, a spirit that draws us out of ourselves to the Father and every other person as brother and sister. Gradually we come to recognize we were never alone at all; we have always been

If we truly appreciated the relational qualities of the God of love, we would begin to see that our bond with Him could never possibly be a discrete, individualized arrangement.

held in the mystery of the divine communion of life and love. Salvation is a process of waking up to an ever-deepening communion with God and all who accept His love. T.S. Eliot's conclusion to East Coker captures well this mystery:

*Love is most nearly itself
when here and now cease to matter.
Old men ought to be explorers.
Here and there does not matter.
We must be still and still moving
into another intensity
for a further union, a deeper communion
through the dark cold and the desolation,
the wave cry, the wind cry, the vast waters
of the petrel and the porpoise.
In the end is my beginning.*

SALVATION THROUGH ACCOMPANIMENT

When the Church reminds us about our need to be saved, the Church is challenging us to accept our deep restlessness and feeling of inadequacy as an in-built, God-given stimulus for a meaningful, intimate and permanent "connection" with God and others. Original Sin is one teaching of the Church that needs no explanation; it is self-evident in the "brokenness" of our world and in the isolation inherent in being human.

The "classic" explanation of salvation most of us speak is of the forgiveness of sins – inherited Original Sin, personal failures, actions we failed to do and our role in perpetuating unjust social structures. Given our contemporary awareness of psychology and recognition of the limitations of genuine human freedom, the language of "sin" and grace can seem somewhat antiquated. Certainly almost every passage of Scripture from Genesis to Revelation speaks about our need for forgiveness, yet in today's world we try to excuse ourselves from admitting our selfishness. Furthermore, having heard so often

of God's mercy, unfailing we all too easily "absolve ourselves" without a genuine recognition of personal guilt and expression of sorrow. To be sure, "sin" is a reality in our personal and communal experience but might there be a more accessible language and explanation for "salvation," a way to acknowledge our need for God and others?

An approach that might be more meaningful in today's culture is speaking of salvation as healing the brokenness and pain of this life, bringing wholeness and peace. Instead of talking about what Christ came to take away, why not think of Christ as the Suffering Servant who came to accompany us in our pain and fear, to assure us we are not alone in our struggles? As we see in the Gospels, He came to free those who felt isolated from the worshipping community. He entered the world of lepers and public sinners and all who were rejected; He touched them and ate with them. Saved one-by-one, their healing became complete only as they returned to community life. And by their return, the community also became restored to wholeness.

By His word and example Christ seemed to say: salvation is not taking away a "problem" or solving a difficult situation; it is a process of sharing the pain and fears of each other. He invited disciples to drink of His cup, to share one common destiny. He seemed to be saying: every one of us can experience God's wholeness, His dream and vision by forgetting ourselves and sharing the pain of others. Christ "saved" us by refusing to come down from the cross, by remaining with the "good thief" and conversing with him. He left us an example: we can join in His saving, healing, transforming presence as we embrace not only our own crosses but stand with others in their times of pain.

Christ's "salvation" is still unfolding in various ways. Mothers freely choose to give birth in dangerous pregnancies, fully aware that they might die; a new life is born, a child is saved. As we live through



natural disasters or violent confrontations, there are always quiet heroes and first responders ready to risk their lives to save and protect. We know the power of intercessory prayer that often brings healing of body or spirit and the way we are all sustained by the consoling witness of cloistered religious and courageous missionaries. These are but a few of the daily reminders and humble expressions of the great, unending drama of Christ's love poured out for us and how that process involves other believers.

Salvation need not be confined to an event long ago and far away. Christ not only gave us an example to follow, but even more, His love flows through us: as we partner with Him in the salvation of the world. His Death-Resurrection continues to unfold within us, among us and through us. As we lose our own "egos" in self-gift, we discover we are not alone. We wake up to our communion in the one Body of Christ. One of the classic icons of the Resurrection depicts Christ lifting up Adam, Eve and all the holy ones, bringing them out of the nether-world; we too are part of that chain of wholeness and healing. We are "saved together" – with Christ and each other.

Immersed into the "baptism" of shared pain, all are changed – cleansed, healed and born again. Salvation – immersion in the human condition with and for the love of Christ – is never merely a "vertical" reality. Salvation is a divine – human mystery. The arms of the cross stretch horizontally as well as vertically!

SALVATION AS SOLIDARITY

Salvation is accomplished as people discover and accept their full immersion into Eucharistic Communion by humble obedience to the Gospel. From Pope St. John Paul II to Pope Emeritus Benedict to Pope Francis, the continuing interpretation and application of the Conciliar message is clear: salvation is experienced through membership in the Communion of Saints. Pope St. John Paul II proclaimed and embodied the virtue of solidarity – that is, no one can live in a meaningful way for himself or herself alone. Pope Emeritus Benedict XVI taught this same message of solidarity in his Encyclical *Spe Salvi*:

We should recall that no man is an island entire of itself. Our lives are involved with one another; through innumerable interactions they are linked together. No one lives alone. No one sins alone. No one is saved alone. The lives of others continually spill over into mine: in what I think, say, do and achieve. And conversely, my life spills over into that of others: for better and for worse. ...Our hope is always essentially also hope for others; only thus is it truly hope for me too. As Christians we should never limit ourselves to asking: how can I save myself? We should also ask: what can I do in order that others may be saved and that for them too the star of hope may rise? Then will I have done my utmost for my own personal salvation as well. (art. 48)

In other words, the mystery of salvation can best be explained as an experience of solidarity, the call to

abandon the isolation of sin for the experience of communion in grace.

The circumstances of “pre-salvation” have to do with brokenness, being lost and fragmented. Salvation emerges as we let the Lord – through the hands and gentle embrace of others – lift us out of the whirlpool of our own despair. No longer flaying about in tense fear, thanks to our life-guard savior, we become playful children, born again. The one lifted and the ones lifting are joined in common joyful enthusiasm.

SALVATION THROUGH OBEDIENCE

The traditional formula most of us learned in Catechism proclaims “Jesus saved us from our sins by dying on the cross.” It is certainly true that Jesus expressed His saving love in the way that He died. But the formula just cited does not adequately convey the full and rich theological beauty of Christ Jesus’ earthly ministry as explained Philippians 2. His “kenosis” or self-emptying should not be limited to the moment of His death but also includes the Incarnation itself and every aspect of His human journey. Christ’s saving love was already at work as He dwelt in the womb of the Virgin Mother, through His “hidden life” at Nazareth and the three years of His public ministry of preaching and healing. In a certain sense, all the 33 years on the way to Calvary was a journey of forgiveness, healing and reconciliation. The miracles He worked were calling and drawing people not only closer to Himself but also to each other. Jesus was forming a community of those open to the mystery of salvation. Again and again in His ministry, Jesus was constantly offering forgiveness – to public sinners, to those excluded

from worship and to His own disciples who betrayed, abandoned or denied Him.

While the “wood of the tree” has its’ special theological significance as the most cursed form of death for a Jew (see Galatians 3:13 and Deuteronomy 21:23), the salvation Jesus offered did not happen automatically because He hung upon a cross. As Philippians 2:8 makes clear, what made the difference was His attitude of perfect obedience: “Obedient even unto death, death on the cross...” In other words, His physical death was the ultimate and perfect expression of the obedience which characterizes His eternal Sonship with the Father and His radical availability to all of us. Three crosses stood on Calvary that day but Christ’s was unique in that He was perfectly innocent of all sin; with full freedom He embraced this form of dying with all its pain and embarrassment.

Our fractured relationship with God and each other was caused by the disobedience of Adam and Eve, and so, as St. Paul reminds us in Romans 5:12-19, the perfect obedience of the “New Adam” brought about salvation. In the very process of dying, He was already dispensing mercy and creating a community as we see in His “Seven Last Words” and in the way He connected His Mother and the Beloved Disciple: He invited them to share His loving obedience.

In the obedient way the Lord died, the Church was born: salvation became available for anyone willing to enter into His obedience. As Christ had taught many times in His public life, to share His life entails losing oneself and taking up the cross as we experience it each day. Christ saved all people open

His “kenosis” or self-emptying should not be limited to the moment of His death but also includes the Incarnation itself and every aspect of His human journey.

to the mystery of obedient love – a gift to be received but also a gift to be enfleshed in our own experience. While salvation is a gift, it still requires our “effort,” that is, the choice to let go of personal ego and control, the willingness to embrace every aspect of our human existence including physical limitation, suffering and our own eventual death.

Christ saved us by his own acceptance of all that happened to Him. His obedience had both an active and passive sense: on the one hand He did not rebel against all that was done to Him but on the other hand, His acceptance was not stoic submission but a deliberate decision, a bold affirmation that His love would not be conquered by anger or hatred. And though His Body might be wounded, by those very wounds He would bring healing to others.

At one and the same time, it would appear that Jesus was both saving and being saved: His self-gift needed to be accepted by the Father. In the very moment of complete kenosis He cried out “My God, my God why have you abandoned me?” These mysterious words reveal some sense of separation yet also a sustained relationship for He prays “My God, my God.” He must have felt an enduring sense of the Spirit lifting Him up and returning Him to His Father. We could say this was not an abandonment “by” the Father or “from” the Father but rather, “into the hands” of the Father. In the way that He died, the Resurrection was beginning to shine forth with its promise of freedom and new life not only for Himself but also for all who believed. Out of the isolation that He experienced – separation from His disciples and His Father – a new relationship between God and humankind was coming to birth in His very person. The perfect, unbroken communion of Trinitarian love was being made manifest for anyone willing to contemplate it and enter into it.

SHARING IN CHRIST’S OBEDIENCE

Mary and the Beloved Disciple model obedience as

acceptance. They allowed the dying of Jesus to live within them and between them. Out of their mutual deference to the mystery they were sharing, the Christian community of salvation was beginning to unfold.

What does this mean for us? Christ saved us by His obedience; our path to salvation means sharing in that same obedience. The obedience of which we speak is not necessarily “taking orders” but is much more all-encompassing and creative, a lifetime of radical availability to all that God asks of us and all that God allows to happen to us. Christian obedience not only accepts with a positive disposition the struggles of life but it always stands ready to listen to the Word welling up within us, to proclaim it and put it into action. Obedience expresses itself most fully when we generously and wholeheartedly use every ounce of our time and talent to help others achieve a full human life and thereby come to experience the love of God.

As partners with Christ’s obedience, we experience our own salvation and become instruments of that grace for others. Drawn into His love for the Father, we are made capable of loving others as God sees and loves them. Consider the beautiful prayer just before the epiclesis in the second Eucharistic Prayer for Reconciliation: “When we ourselves had turned away from you on account of our sins, you brought us back to be reconciled, O Lord, so that converted at last to you we might love one another through your Son, whom for our sake you handed over to death.”

Throughout all the Eucharistic Prayers and prefaces of the Roman Missal, salvation is described in terms of our duty of giving thanks; that is, as we thank the Lord, our salvation is deepened and our understanding of our role in the salvation of the world is also expanded. Our “emptiness” allows an opening for Christ’s “emptiness” to reside within us. We not only “obey” because we follow His example; rather, it is truly Christ’s obedient love



that flows through us and enables us to accomplish great mysteries beyond our imagination or comprehension. Immersed in His humble presence and love, we become partners with Him and each other; our words and actions become one common voice and joint action with all members of His Body.

From this sacramental and Eucharistic perspective, all obedience, self-surrender and submission to the realities of people and life itself become a means of sanctification of self and others, an expression of divine charity and holiness. I am saved and we are saved by our mutual obedient deference as spouses in marriage, as parents and children to one another, as pastors and parishioners to each other, bishops and clergy to each other, religious to each other in communal life and as we stand by each other in sickness and health – until death – in marriage, friendship and all committed relationships.

If you want to “explain” salvation, embody obedient love. Consider the witness of Jesus throughout His earthly ministry – a call from one communion

to another. As we see in the prolonged dialogue of John 6, Jesus was inviting His disciples and the Jewish crowd to move from the miracle of one communion (the five loaves for the 5,000) to a sharing in His own communion with the Father, from a rather “accidental” and surprising momentary “communion” to a fuller, richer sharing of gifts, human and divine.

At the penetrating question of Jesus in John 6, “Do you want to leave me?” Peter and the twelve promised to remain with Him, even as others, perplexed and overwhelmed, deserted Him. Their initial “Amen” later became all-encompassing as they shared completely of Christ’s obedience and experienced their full communion with Jesus in their own martyrdom. So too for us – our “Amen” to the minister’s offer of sacramental communion is not only an affirmation of Christ’s presence in the sacrament but also a renewal of our baptismal bond with the whole Body of Christ, a pledge to be a vessel of salvation to all in need. Our final and total “Amen” will come at our death when we will

enjoy eternal communion in the cosmic mystery of Christ with His Father and the Spirit. From one communion to another!

EPILOGUE: MINISTRY AS COMMUNION-IN-SALVATION

A now deceased priest of the Archdiocese of Detroit, Monsignor F. Gerald Martin, used to offer the following spontaneous petition at week-day Eucharists in the seminary chapel: “for those whose salvation is interwoven with ours, let us pray to the Lord...” In a very succinct way, his petition summarizes what I have tried to say in this article. It also opens the door for further application for ministry according to our life circumstances. His prayer reminds us that we are indeed being saved every day in and through the relationships that we have with one another.

Through the circumstances of family living, ministry, life in community and dealing with illness, we recognize the blessing we can be for one another. We are saved not in spite of the people around us but precisely as we respect and cooperate with the presence of the Lord loving us through each other.

As the Scriptures tell of how Christ himself ministered, a major factor was the creation of a community. He called the twelve apostles and He sent disciples forth two by two. He called and sent a further 72. His mission, though initially circumscribed by His desire to bring a renewal to the people of Israel, later expanded to something universal. Even in His own lifetime, he did not let himself be confined to Nazareth or Capernaum. He explained to His disciples He must keep moving on to other towns to proclaim the Gospel. In this sense, priests as well as Bishops are challenged by the Council Fathers of Vatican II to carry in their heart a loving concern for the world-wide mission of salvation and the care of all the churches throughout the world. (See the Decree on Priestly Ministry and Life, art. 10)

A spirituality of priestly ministry as communion must be built on the fact that the priest not only represents Christ the head of the Church but also represents the Church itself; In Persona Christi is always complimented by in Persona Ecclesiae. A priest manifests and discovers the presence of Christ precisely as he also remembers that in his own person he represents the communion of the Church. Implications of this reality challenge priests to live in communion with each other. Their “shared life” and mutual support for one another speaks volumes to their congregations.

The balance between communion and mission is lived out in priestly service and in all vocations of the Christian life precisely in the healthy tension of being and doing; ultimately, presence itself can be salvific, even more than activities. And joint ministry is always more effective and meaningful than actions by specific individuals, even extremely gifted and talented ministers. The ultimate question for any ecclesial minister gets down to this: what will best build up the Church as a whole?

Pope Francis has also given us beautiful insights for a spirituality of communion for those who are married. In His Apostolic Exhortation Amoris Laetitia, he puts it very beautifully, The Trinity is present in the temple of marital communion. Just as God dwells in the praises of His people (cf. Ps 22:3), so He dwells deep within the marital love that gives Him glory. ... The spirituality of family love is made up of thousands of small but real gestures. In that variety of gifts and encounters which deepen communion, God has His dwelling place. ... Hence those who have deep spiritual aspirations should not feel that the family detracts from their growth in the life of the spirit but rather see it as a path which the Lord is using to lead them to the heights of mystical union. (art. 314-316).

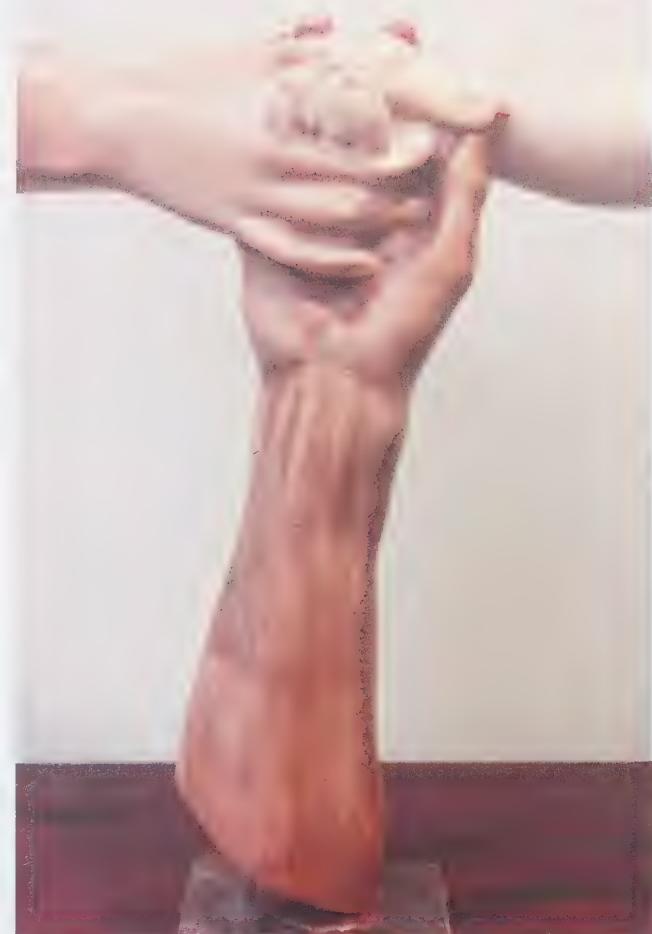
The ministry and life of consecrated religious proclaims and embodies the communal dimension

of salvation. Living the depth of Baptism through vows of poverty, chastity and obedience, consecrated religious foreshadow the life of the Kingdom. Secular institutes allow one to reside in the world with the total self-dedication to God, acting as a leaven in the midst of the world – not only for one's own sake but precisely for strengthening the whole Church. The single life too, in its own way, is part of this same spirituality of communion: a person who by choice or circumstance lives the single life in a way so as to use their unique freedom for the good of others, is indeed building up the Church.

In all of these states of life and circumstances of service, we are the living stones of the Church. As Christ said of himself in John 2, even if the temple be destroyed, it will be rebuilt on the third day. The Church throughout the ages and throughout the world to this very day experiences brokenness because of internal tensions as well as external persecution. Whenever and however the members of Christ's Body are suffering, the Paschal Mystery is still unfolding and the mystery of salvation is being accomplished in ways that go beyond anything we could imagine!

So what is the answer to the ever-perplexing questions "Have you been saved? Have you declared Jesus your personal savior?" Yes, we have been saved once and for all by the obedience of Christ our Lord to the point of death and by the Father raising Him from the dead. But each of us must choose each day to let Christ's obedient love flow through us and that happens in and through communion in His Body, the Church. It is a matter of processing daily from one communion to another.

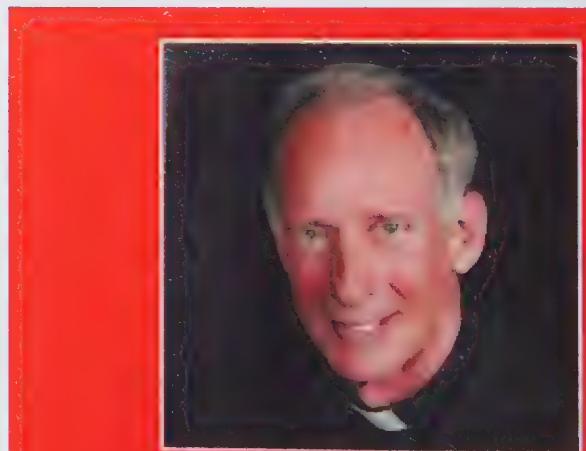
Let the last word of this article be the simple story of Father Zosima in the Brothers Karamazov. Trying to teach how our lives are interwoven and "saved together," he told a story about a Russian peasant woman who had a small plot of land which she zealously guarded; no one dared steal from her meager produce! Most people lived in fear of her and she was rather isolated. Yet on one occasion, the



urgent need of a desperate, hungry person moved her to an act of compassion: she shared a turnip with a poor woman. When the Russian peasant died and reached the gates of heaven, she was reminded that she had been a harsh and difficult person but because of one deed of charity in her past, God was willing to send her back to Earth for a second chance. The instructions she received were as follows: she was to be lifted up from the Earth holding on to the stem of an upside-down turnip. If she held on, she would make it to heaven. Unlikely as it all seemed, this rather stocky peasant lady indeed began to rise from the ground toward the heavens as she held on tightly to the stem of the turnip. But when her compatriots saw her rising upward, they started to grab onto her coat tails. Afraid that would be too much weight for the fragile stem of the turnip, true to form, the peasant woman took her hands off the stem to push the other people away; she fell to the ground and lost her chance of salvation. Dostoevsky's point would seem to be: no one can be saved all on his or her own. [WE ARE SAVED TOGETHER!](#)

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION

1. In his article, Msgr. Zenz outlines a tension present in Christian spirituality in every age and every culture: The risk of “individualizing” our relationship with the Lord vs. the challenge of having a healthy sense of “Church” as the setting in which we meet and share the Lord’s presence. Do you agree with his concern that our culture tends to over-stress the “me and Jesus” side of the equation? Do you feel this tension within yourself?
2. Msgr. Zenz suggests in his article that a good way to describe “salvation” might be by reference to the theme of “communion” – a shared “wholeness.” Communion with the Lord Jesus is experienced by our sharing in the “Communion of Saints” and through the Holy Eucharist. What implications do you see for his insight that communion with the Lord can never be “private?”
3. He makes the point that theologically we should say we were saved by Christ’s attitude of obedience. He goes on to suggest that obedience is more than “taking orders” from superiors; it is all-encompassing, existential and every day; an attitude of openness and availability. Even more, he reminds us “our” obedience is actually Christ’s loving presence working through us, partnering with us. How do you understand obedience? Did his essay stretch your appreciation of obedience?
4. Besides the word “obedience,” Msgr. Zenz also uses the virtue “solidarity” to describe the process of how Christ saved us – i.e. by accompaniment of us in our joys and sorrows. He did not “take away” problems but shared (and shares) our pain. In so doing He models the ministry of accompaniment as a means of saving and being saved; we are saved by “shared experience.” Can you think of concrete examples from your own life and ministry wherein you acted according to the model of accompaniment and real presence rather than trying to be the “savior” by “solving” (or “re-solving”) someone’s pain/struggle/loss?
5. He notes that “communion” with God and each other emerges gradually as an offering and accepting of self-gift; exactly what happens in the Eucharist. Do I see the connection between communion through sacrifice in my daily life and in the Eucharist itself?
6. If you are a homilist or catechist on a regular basis, review in your own mind and heart how often you have tended to emphasize the “personal” aspects of the spiritual life and how often you have highlighted the “communal” dimensions of salvation.
7. Communion is not a static accomplishment; it flows forth naturally, even necessarily in mission. And of course, mission’s goal is drawing all into divine communion, an ever deepening process. Does my own pursuit of spirituality and that of our parish bring together in a balanced way the energy of “communion – to mission – to communion?”



ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Ordained July 1, 1978 for the Archdiocese of Detroit, Msgr. John Zenz received a Doctorate in Spirituality from the Gregorian University in Rome in 1984. He served in various capacities in the Archdiocese including Moderator of the Curia, Vicar General and Episcopal Vicar for one of the four Regions of the Archdiocese. Since 2008 he has been pastor of Holy Name Parish, Birmingham. He became Executive Editor of *Human Development Magazine* in May 2015.

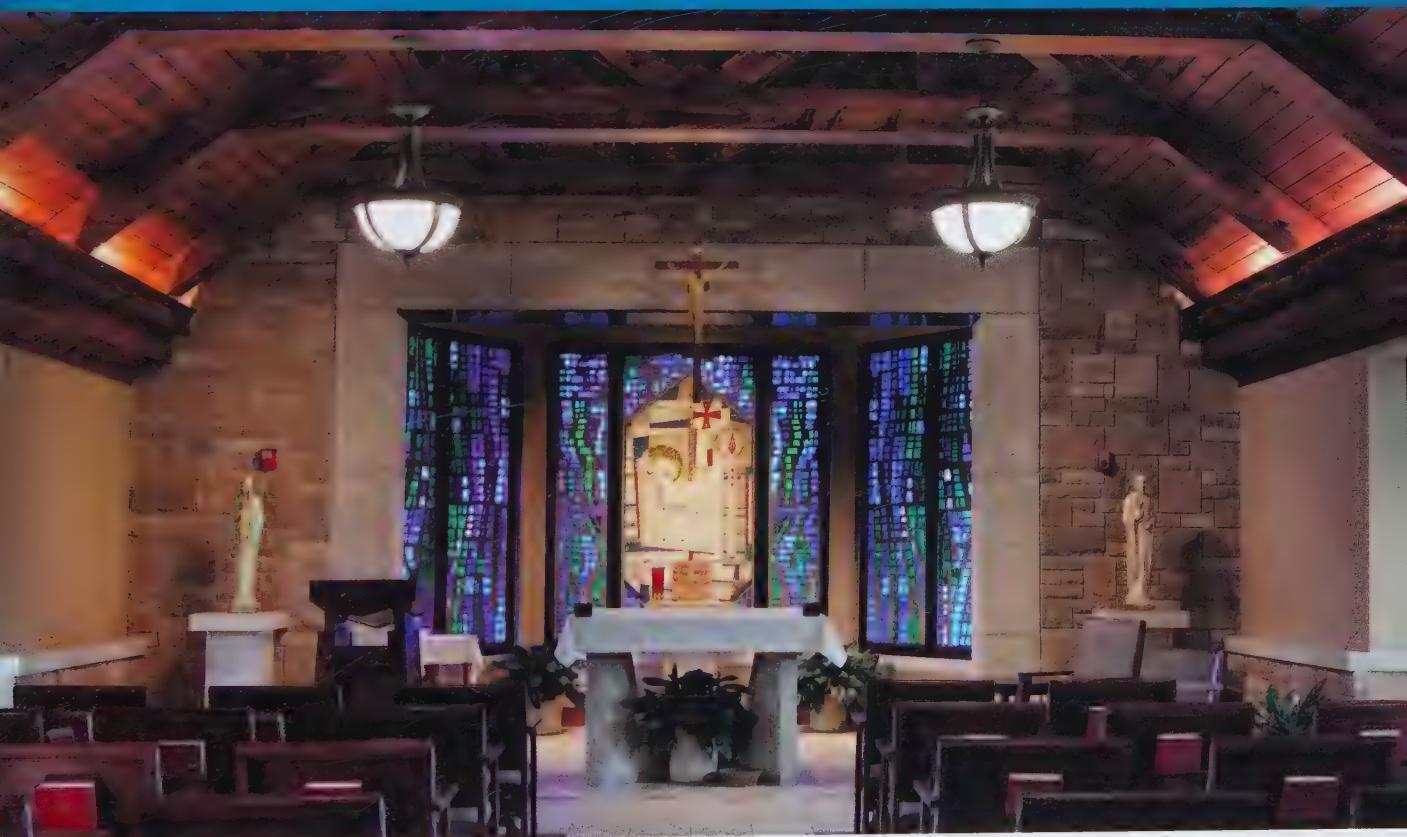
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Joe Shoots, MA, LLP, CAADC
Executive Director
Men's Treatment Program
jshoots@guesthouse.org

Mary Ellen Merrick, IHM, D. Min., MAC
Executive Director
Women's Treatment Program
memerrick@guesthouse.org



Individualized Treatment and Compassionate Care
1601 Joslyn Road
Lake Orion, MI 48360
GuestHouse.org
248-391-4445
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FROM I TO WE:

The Journey of Twelve Step Recovery and Christian Salvation

Jeff Jay





INTRODUCTION

We addicts know a special kind of hell. It is a solitary confinement, even in the presence of family, friends, or colleagues. Although we may win a reprieve by using our drug or practicing our compulsive behavior, the rewards do not last and the effects diminish, forcing us into greater excess. We are in a downward spiral, though we will not admit it, and we struggle to maintain control. Addiction makes us violate our values, both in what we must do to satisfy our compulsions and in how we must lie to cover up the consequences. We wish it were not so, but we cannot help ourselves.

It is a private hell. We believe no one could understand or help us. Our behavior is too shameful to reveal, so there is no point in talking. The only relief is the drug or the behavior, yet these things fail us, too. We resolve to rid ourselves of the addiction, and we tell ourselves we are regaining control. We fall again in days or weeks, our willpower defeated; and we descend into self-loathing. Our thoughts accuse us: we are weak, we are worthless, we are unconscionably bad. Although we do not have St. Paul's holiness, we can identify with his pain: "I do not understand what I do. For what I want to do I do not do, but what I hate I do" (Rom. 7:15). We feel imprisoned, and we lose hope.

We may be trapped in pornography addiction, alcoholism, gambling addiction, codependency, drug addiction, eating disorders or other compulsive variations. The particulars may be different, but the suffering and isolation are similar. We become anxious and depressed, so we seek what soothes us. We are extreme examples of the modern addiction to all things material. We are narcissists who hate our own image.

Recovering addicts, on the other hand, know a special kind of joy, a communal celebration. We are survivors of a terrible struggle, and we know how fortunate we are to be alive. Within the group, our laughter is easy and our tears are genuine, because we have been saved together. Recovery is not something we have achieved on our own, but rather something we attain and maintain as part of a larger community. Those who came before us provided help and guidance, just as we will ultimately help those who come after us.

The journey of recovery is a journey from I to We, from the isolation of the illness to the fellowship of the recovering community. At its best, recovery heals our mind, body, and spirit, creating a global transformation over months and years. It is nothing less than an on-going metanoia or conversion.

In the book Alcoholics Anonymous (AA), popularly known as the Big Book, we find the following warning and directive: "We are not cured of alcoholism. What we really have is a daily reprieve contingent on the maintenance of our spiritual condition. Every day is a day when we must carry the vision of God's will into all of our activities" (AA, pg. 85). If we replace "alcoholism" in this excerpt with "trespasses" or "sin" or "transgressions," it could fit into any Sunday sermon. But what must be done to

maintain our spiritual condition?

The AA pioneers put great emphasis on prayer and meditation, but they put even more emphasis on helping the next alcoholic. They were emphatic about the need to "pass it on," to continually move from I to We. They were especially fond of a passage from James, which they abbreviated as: "Faith without works is dead" (Jas. 2:14-26). "Works" in this context meant carrying the message of recovery to the still-suffering alcoholic. "You have to give it away to keep it," was their maxim. Interestingly, they believed two recovering alcoholics should always go together to meet with one who was still suffering.

THE 12 STEPS AND THE WAY OF JESUS

The principles of Twelve Step recovery and Christian salvation have many parallels. In many ways, the Steps are a description of Christian discipleship in twelve sentences. Although Bill Wilson, the co-founder of AA, had had a profound spiritual experience which revolutionized his life, he knew that most people had a more gradual awakening, and he codified the stages of this transformation in a dozen suggestions. In an effort to appeal to as many alcoholics as possible, he removed specific Biblical references from his writings, but the influence of the Scriptures and Christian tradition, are clear.

Father Ed Dowling, S.J., became Bill Wilson's unofficial AA sponsor and spiritual advisor, although Bill was not Catholic. Father Dowling had sought out Bill after reading the AA Big Book, convinced the writer must be a scholar of the Spiritual Exercises of St. Ignatius. The two men met on a cold and rainy night, and Dowling was amazed to learn that Bill Wilson had never heard of Ignatius or the Exercises. Yet the Twelve Steps clearly contained many elements of the Examen, and other points of Christian

Recovery is not something we have achieved on our own, but rather something we attain and maintain as part of a larger community.



teaching. Wilson was not ignorant of Catholicism, as Dr. Bob Smith, AA's other co-founder, worked closely with Sr. Ignatia Gavin in the first AA-inspired hospital ward, located in Akron, Ohio. Sr. Ignatia played a powerful role in early Twelve Step history, though she is all but invisible in AA literature. Fr. Dowling and Bill Wilson discussed Christianity, Catholicism, and the Steps endlessly. However, Wilson always strove to keep the AA message free from any specific theology. In this way, the nascent fellowship was able to work with men and women of all faiths—or none. Still, the connection to the message of Jesus Christ was unmistakable.

When Jesus sent the twelve apostles into the countryside to heal disease and prepare the way for Him, he sent them in pairs (cf. Mk. 6:7). When Jesus' followers had grown in number, he sent out seventy-two disciples to preach the good news, also in pairs

(Lk.10:1). Why not singly? What do two people carry with them that one does not? Jesus tells us something astonishing about the power of two-or-more and the power of groups. "Where two or three are gathered in my name, there I am among you" (Mt. 18:20). The AA's did the same thing nineteen centuries later.

The promise Jesus made to be present when we gather in his name is as mysterious as the promise to be present (transubstantiated) in the bread and wine of the Eucharist. When we gather for the celebration of the Eucharist, we have both the power of the group and the Eucharist together, but when the twelve went out into the countryside, they did not carry the Eucharist. They carried Jesus in their midst, along with the good news he revealed.

When Jesus taught us how to pray, he used communal language: "Our Father." In these two words, Jesus defined our relationship to God, as his children; and our relationship to each other, as siblings and co-equals. Even in solitary prayer, when we pray the Our Father, we are implicitly directed by Jesus to bring the entire body of Christ into our minds. Even in solitude, the *Pater Noster* is a movement from I to We. Twelve Step meetings traditionally conclude with the assembled group reciting the Lord's Prayer.

The external parallels between the early Church and the recovery movement are unmistakable, but the spiritual parallels between Scripture and the Steps are even deeper. However, like Christian teaching, much of the truth is wrapped in paradox. If we try to hold it too tightly and put it under the microscope of logic, its truth will vanish. For example, when Jesus Christ came into this world, infinite God became finite man, and contained both. This fact of our faith is logically inconceivable, as the finite cannot contain the infinite. Jesus' incarnation as God and man demarcates the point where believers must abandon the comfort of logic and jump into unseen realms of faith. Only then can the miracle of His suffering, death, and resurrection have meaning. Only then can we come home to the limitless mercy of God.

STEP ONE

Step One also contains a thorny paradox. Addicted people come to a Twelve Step meeting hoping to find enough power to rein in their behavior. More than anything, they want to regain control. Instead they are asked to admit their powerlessness. How can this help? How can this final humiliation open the way to freedom? Step One requires a leap of faith: "We admitted we were powerless over alcohol, that our lives had become unmanageable."

The process and the paradox of Step One is similar to the Christian conversion experience. For the undecided or the searcher or the non-believer, the journey to faith is not straightforward. People do not choose faith because it seems like a pleasant idea or because they want a new book to read. People come to Jesus in pain, in discouragement, and in sorrow. In the crucible of suffering, faith calls us to believe in the love of God, which at that moment may seem patently absurd.

Pain has always been the touchstone of spiritual growth. This fact has never been a popular selling point for Christianity or Twelve Step recovery. Saul was knocked off his horse and blinded, as part of his transformation to Paul. Countless recovering addicts have also been knocked off their horses and left helpless before they would admit their powerlessness. In pain and humiliation, we come to understand the saying: "People don't change because they see the light—they change when they feel the heat."

King David tells us an important truth. "The Lord is close to the brokenhearted and saves those who are crushed in spirit" (Ps. 34:18). A person who is ready to accept Step One is a person who has been crushed in spirit. Their soul cries out: "My way has failed; my life has become unmanageable. I have no hope left within me." Here is a soul God can work with, because it no longer fights the love of God. So, by definition, God is close to the brokenhearted (though He was always closer than air).

"Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven" (Mat. 5:3). We are the broken ones, the poor in spirit, and we are to be rewarded. Not while we are still fighting, not while still thinking we can do it on our own, but when our spirit has grown poor. When our ego has been decimated, as happened to Paul, the Lord will be able to work with us. "My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness" (2 Cor. 12:9).

STEP TWO

Faith calls me to accept the unimaginable and believe. This great leap beyond the bounds of reason, has much in common with Step Two: "Came to believe that a power greater than ourselves could restore us to sanity." We were in pain, we wanted a solution, we were ready to admit our powerlessness and unmanageability. But then, what? Like the journey of Christian faith, Step Two asked us to look for a solution beyond our individual egos, to a power greater than ourselves.

If we were locked in a stubborn atheism, we could look to the AA members who had been successful, to a group of drunks (g.o.d.), who could take the place of true God, for the time being. At least we could admit that something had worked for them, even if we could not comprehend it.

Jesus said: "Everything is possible for one who believes" (Mk. 9:23). He said this to a man who did not know who Jesus was, and was not sure what He could do. He was uncertain, but he wanted desperately to believe, because his son's life was on the line. The man cried out to Jesus: "I do believe; help me overcome my unbelief!" (Mk. 9:24). This desperation is one of the primary catalysts of faith. Recovering people, whether in Families Anonymous, Sex Addicts Anonymous, or Gamblers Anonymous, often talk about the "gift of desperation." This gift forces us to set down our analytical objections, and reach out in hope. Time and again, Jesus repeated a variation of: "Your faith has saved you." Step Two



asks us to believe we *could* be healed, *could* be released from our pain, and *could* be forgiven. How similar this Step appears to the struggle of a person returning to the faith or joining a parish for the first time. For most people, it is a gradual awakening—a process rather than an event.

STEP THREE

As we continued the process of recovery, and we had stabilized physically and mentally, we were asked to make a commitment. Step Three: “Made a decision to turn our will and our lives over to the care of God, *as we understood him*.”

My initial reaction to this Step was negative. I chafed against its words, in the name of free will. However,

when I re-examined the Step a few days later, I found a deeper understanding. True, my free will could not be handed over like a pumpkin, but Step Three asked me something different. It asked me to place my will and my life in the *care of God*, to make my will congruent with his will.

My mentors said God did not care what shoes I wore or what sandwich I ate; but when it came to my addiction, I should hand all decisions over to Him. Instead of trying to decide each day whether to attend a meeting, I should defer the matter to God, *as I understood him* (my friends were careful to avoid theological entanglements). Instead of trying to manage my urges, I turned the matter over to God. Instead of enduring countless internal arguments,



I quit the debating society and took the actions I believed God would want me to take. The choices were almost always clear. As a result, I found myself in a place of safety, and saw that God was doing for me what I could not do for myself.

St. Paul foreshadowed Step Three when he admonished the Philippians: "...continue to work out your own salvation with fear and trembling; for it is God who is at work in you, enabling you both to will and to work for his good purpose" (Ph. 2:12-13). Steps One, Two, and Three are a compact retelling of scripture and spiritual direction. For example, the first two verses of the Psalm 40: "I waited patiently for the Lord; he turned to me and

heard my cry. He lifted me out of the slimy pit, out of the mud and mire; he set my feet on a rock and gave me a firm place to stand." Like the Psalms, the Steps are personal; however, unlike the Psalms, they are the product of shared experience (Step One: "We admitted we..."). There is a radical equality among members of the recovering community, so the Steps are offered as suggestions, not commandments. Although we are saved together, each person must work out the terms of their own recovery, and develop their own relationship with God.

I was genuinely amazed in the early days of my recovery to see people of many faiths and no faith gathered together in these meetings. They didn't

try to convince each other of their beliefs, but rather shared their experience, strength, and hope for mutual encouragement. Despite the different denominations and religions, despite a few atheists and agnostics, there was a genuine desire among the participants to work together, and put principles before personalities.

At the beginning of every meeting a selection was read from the chapter “How it Works” in the Big Book. This selection contained the Twelve Steps, followed by a wry observation that most people found the Steps almost impossible to accept and digest. The excerpt continued: “Do not be discouraged. No one among us has been able to maintain anything like perfect adherence to these principles. We are not saints. The point is, that we are willing to grow along spiritual lines. The principles we have set down are guides to progress. We claim spiritual progress rather than spiritual perfection” (AA, pg. 60).

This same equality is also necessary in the Christian community when we come together for liturgy. In the order of the Mass, before we profess our faith, or hear the Word of God, or celebrate the Eucharist, we are called to remember our shortcomings by praying the *Confiteor*.

I confess to almighty God
and to you, my brothers and sisters,
that I have greatly sinned
in my thoughts and in my words,
in what I have done
and in what I have failed to do....

As children of the Father, we come together in sacred community to admit our brokenness, our incompleteness, and our longing. Without this admission, we cannot possibly be open to the light of grace. Leonard Cohen expressed this beautifully in his song, “Anthem.”

There is a crack, a crack in everything
That's how the light gets in.

We can only be present to God—and each other—if we open up. There is no point in trying to hide our faults from God, but there is also no point in denying our faults to each other. When we admit our shortcomings or our sins, we bring them out into the light, and then something wonderful happens. Addictions, character defects, and sins grow in the dark; they thrive in secrecy, and multiply like mold in the shadows. Our defects lose their power when we bring them into the light. Recovering people confess their weaknesses, because in doing so they can defeat their weaknesses. If I can be honest about my own struggles today, my friends will be better able to support me. My willingness to be open is simultaneously a welcoming of God’s grace.

STEPS FOUR AND FIVE

In the recovery process, the next two Steps provide a method for spiritual house cleaning. Step Four: “Made a searching and fearless moral inventory.” Here we are called not just to itemize our wrongdoings, but to understand our motivations, and to identify the specific character flaws that drove our actions. Most often, these defects were rooted in pride, greed, fear, and the like. The goal was to stop playing the blame-game and to move beyond resentment and self-pity.

Step Five: “Admitted to God, to ourselves, and another human being the exact nature of our wrongs.” It is easier to do an examination of conscience privately than to share the results of that examination with another person. Our pride rebels against the idea. But the collective wisdom of the group told us that to ignore this vital step was to court relapse. A healthy dose of humility was an effective remedy against pride. “Therefore, confess your sins to each other and pray for each other so that you may be healed” (Jas. 5:16).

Approaching the Sacrament of Reconciliation with a priest includes the same good medicine. It is much easier to petition God privately for forgiveness than to present ourselves to our confessor. It has been

said that humility is teachability, and we can learn more about ourselves by revealing our pain than by stockpiling it inside.

The old maxim says: “A problem shared is a problem halved.” But why? Because we are forced to bring our harrying thoughts down into coherent sentences, where they become less onerous. When we are trapped in our own mind, our thoughts swarm and accuse; but when we put them into words and share them honestly with another, in the clarifying give-and-take of conversation, they are stripped of their power. In the journey from I to We, in the journey of recovery, we find relief.

Every person experiences negative feelings: anxiety, confusion, anger, depression, and more. It is part of the human condition. At these times, unwelcome thoughts tend to gather in our mind, reinforcing the negative emotion. We may try to distract ourselves with duties or activities, or use cognitive or centering techniques to alleviate the symptoms, but there is another way to soothe the spirit in times of trouble: talking to an understanding person. The reason this simple method works is three-fold.

First, we force ourselves to stanch the torrent of negative emotions and put them into words. We define the components of the problem, and therefore give them a limited character.

Second, as we examine our thinking with a friend, we gain a greater clarity, both from ourselves and from the observations of our companion. We do not usually need much advice, as much as we need to know the other person has compassion (Latin: *to suffer with*). Knowing that someone understands us deeply, that they do not see us as weak, that they will accompany us on our journey, is often more important than an immediate solution to our problem (which normally does not exist).

Third, we demonstrate a bit of the humility necessary to begin our rehabilitation. The *Big I* is often allergic to such openness. Even in the grip of severe

depression or anxiety, a certain negative pride can hold us captive, and make us unable or unwilling to reach out for help. Yet it is precisely in this personal surrender that we are unburdened. It is in vulnerability that we are strengthened, because when we open ourselves up to another person, we give God a channel to work in our lives.

Even Jesus, who needed neither forgiveness or guidance, was constantly demonstrating humility. He even began his public ministry by being baptized by John the Baptist (much to John’s surprise). Jesus’ actions triggered a divine response, with the Holy Spirit descending on him like a dove, and by the words of his Father, “This is my Son, the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased” (Mt. 3:17). So too, in a lesser way, do we become beloved, when we have the humility to present ourselves as we are.

Our experience of God is both individual and collective. God works through people, and when we come together in humility and gratitude to one another, our actions become our prayers. When we accompany one another and are of service to one another, we fulfill the words of St. Teresa of Calcutta: “To work is to pray.”

VERTICAL PRAYER, HORIZONTAL PRAYER

For people in recovery and followers of Christ, prayers can be both vertical and horizontal. Solitary prayers are vertical, they are prayers to God, and they make us mindful of his unfathomable wisdom. They may be prayers of petition or gratitude, they may be formal, informal or meditative. There are countless methods for this private devotion, and they can be endlessly fruitful.

Horizontal prayers are done in community, as we join the body of Christ. They can be formal like a mass, or informal like an AA meeting. Horizontal prayers also include service to others. It is not enough for us to simply attend mass or attend a Twelve Step meeting. Jesus did not initiate the Eucharist without first washing the feet of his

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disciples. Only by such a radical act of humility could he drive home the point that ritual alone is insufficient. His directive to Peter, "Feed my lambs, feed my sheep," is not mere metaphor.

Prayers in community are joyful, like the sacrament of Baptism, or sorrowful, like an untimely funeral. We move through the seasons of the year and the seasons of our life together, accompanying one another on the "Road of Happy Destiny" (AA, pg. 164). It is only natural that we come together to laugh, as well as to cry. To complete the maxim cited earlier: "A problem shared is a problem halved, and a joy shared is doubled."

Solitary, vertical prayers are essential, and they bring us into the presence of God and the mystical body of Christ. In silent prayer and meditation, we join in the communion of saints, and find renewal. The earliest Twelve Steppers were also insistent on solitary prayers. They recommended silent time in the morning to read a bible passage or another spiritual work, followed by meditation and prayer, similar to *lectio divina*.

An important aspect of the AA's method was memorialized in Step Eleven: "Sought through prayer and meditation to improve our conscious contact with God, as we understood him, praying

only for knowledge of his will for us and the power to carry that out.” This Step focuses on two items: “knowledge of his will,” and “the power to carry that out.” These details are important safeguards against self-centeredness and self-pity. They point to the work at hand: staying sober, being of service to others, and looking to God for strength.

When we join vertical and horizontal prayers together, our faith becomes three-dimensional. Vertical prayers connect us to the source of infinite power: God’s love. Horizontal prayer allows us to put that power to work, to be an instrument of God’s love in the world. In community, Jesus is present, and the result is a greater outflowing of grace, both for ourselves and those around us.

People in recovery say: “You have to give it away to keep it.” If I want God to help me stay in recovery another twenty-four hours, I have to reach out to someone else. I may help by giving someone a ride, by talking to a newcomer, and so on. Most of all, I have to share my experience, strength, and hope.

In community, my faith bears fruit. When I show up at church, when I participate in the liturgy, and when I accept the sacraments, I am bringing my faith to life. When I sacrifice one hour of my Sunday morning to join with the children of Our Father, I have made a specific place for God in my life. As I mature in my faith, I will naturally ask what more I can do to help my parish. Which of the many volunteer activities can I accept? How can I support the work of the wider church? “Preach the gospel unceasingly,” said St. Francis. “When necessary use words.” My actions are my prayers.

I remember being quite new in recovery when someone recommended I volunteer to clean up the coffee pots after the meeting. It was a large gathering of over one hundred people, so there were several large pots, as well as cups, spoons, and so on. I did not want to accept the job, even though I would not

have to do it alone. It seemed tedious and slightly embarrassing, and besides I hardly had my footing in this new thing called recovery. I had no idea what a gift I’d been given.

I got to know people, not in the safety and structure of the meeting, but in the muck of used coffee grounds. I came early and stayed late. I gave just a little more of myself to support something greater than myself. I was doing something—however small—that was unselfish. Perhaps there was hope for me, after all. Perhaps I could live my life differently. I did not realize it then, but my actions also showed the older members of the group that I was serious, which in turn caused them to take me more seriously. I was not just a touch-and-go member; I was taking out the garbage. I was somebody.

I did not understand this work was a palpable form of prayer and commitment, but I see now how it helped safeguard my recovery. This little service job helped pull me into the protection of the group, and made me an active participant in the body of Christ.

In a physical body, every cell has its job, and each is dependent on the whole for its life. Inactive cells are dead cells, and they are eliminated. Living cells draw their life from the body, and give their full measure to the body. Cells that are selfish, that only live for themselves are cancer cells. They do not serve the life of the body, and they ultimately weaken or kill the body—and themselves.

Jesus calls us to “have life, and have it abundantly” (Jn. 10:10). He calls us to be one among many on the hillside. We may fear there is not enough to eat, but if we give him all we have, he will turn it into plenty. Jesus calls us to share what we have: our gifts, our sorrows, our laughter. On this never-ending journey, He is there among us—on the journey from I to We.

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION

In his essay, Jeff Jay describes addiction as a “private hell;” recovery/salvation can happen only when we admit our need of others and accept their love. Even if we are not dealing with a specific addiction at this time, undoubtedly we see traces of the kind of self-made “hell” in our own lives. Am I willing to recognize these tendencies and talk about them? Am I willing to listen to another in his/her struggle to face painful realities?

The author speaks about “vertical prayer” and “horizontal prayer” and how they complement one another. Is there a good rhythm of both types of prayer in my life? Does my “private” type with the Lord also consciously include prayer with and for the whole Church and the world?

Jeff Jay makes the point that the principles and process of 12 step recovery parallel the process of admitting our need for salvation and experiencing salvation. In both cases – recovery/salvation – the process is not a personal “achievement” but something attained and maintained by membership in a larger community. Could this insight perhaps help us explain salvation as a dynamic and on-going process rather than a one-time event?

He ends his essay with the delightful story of cleaning the coffee pots, cups and spoons for 100 people – something he did not want to do! Yet, it was the perfect expression – “sacrament” perhaps – of his movement from “I-to-we.” How are you moving from “I-to-we”? Can you recall a similar story of something humbling that helped you realize you “belong” to the Lord and the Church and are not just an “occasional” believer?



ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Jeff Jay is the author of “Navigating Grace” (Hazelden 2015), and other titles. He is a clinical interventionist in private practice.



GOD, NEIGHBOR AND SACRIFICE

The heart of the Spirituality of Father Solanus Casey

Larry Webber, OFM





INTRODUCTION

Christian spirituality bases itself on the Gospel message and witness of Jesus Christ: an authentic relationship with God, true holiness, leads to a care and concern for one's neighbor. Likewise, care for a neighbor strengthens a person's relationship with God and serves as a manifestation of true holiness.

One principle of the spirituality of Father Solanus Casey was a constant awareness and insistence on our right relationship to - and dependence on – God and neighbor. It is a principle that he often spoke of and made reference to in his encounters with so many thousands who came to seek his spiritual advice. What he most frequently asked them to do was to show a sign of faith in God and charity toward one's neighbor. His own commitment and the response he invited from them involved some sort of sacrifice. In that way Father Solanus always seemed to link his acts of love toward God and neighbor with sacrifice, personal and spiritual, and ultimately with the sacrifice of God in Jesus the Crucified.



In this article I will explore the roots of a threefold dimension of authentic holiness in the spirituality of Father Solanus: God, neighbor and sacrifice. As the American Church and the Universal Church begin to know his life and legacy, I hope that the small seed I plant in these reflections might bear fruit in readers such that they may be able to make their own the spirituality of Father Solanus. As stated in the prayer for his canonization, the goal is that all of us “imitate and carry on (Fr. Solanus’) love for all the poor and suffering of our world.”

God, neighbor and sacrifice are certainly not the only elements one could explore in trying to encapsulate the heart of the spirituality and holiness of Blessed Solanus. Two virtues for which he is remembered are gratitude and humility.

Neither gratitude nor humility are listed as one of the cardinal, theological or heavenly virtues. The Spiritual Masters place humility as the foundation for all virtues, including gratitude, especially in relation to God. Humility leads us to be grateful to Him as we realize that all depends on Him: all we do and all we are. “Blessed be God in all His designs,” Solanus would often say.

This attitude of humility and gratitude stand in stark contrast with the “cult” of individualism and the glaring lack of gratitude so characteristic of our

times, clouding over much of our beautiful tradition of charity toward God and our neighbor that has been expressed in many works of social service by the Church (for example, in health care and education).

AWAY FROM “SELF”

It almost appears today that there is a cultural addiction to “I:” “I” think...I want, etc. or when it is not “I,” very likely it is “my:” “my freedom... my choice...my gun” – you name it.) This cultural obsession with “I” and “my” is not new, though technological innovations like the cell phone seem to be extending it and leading us into epic levels of self-absorption. Our addictive culture further accentuates the focus on “I:” “I need another drink... I’m hungry...I need another fix....”

Self-centeredness in itself is not necessarily an addiction, though it may be a symptom pointing in that direction. Such self-absorption not only blocks possibilities for healing by seeking help outside of oneself, but it can also slowly deaden our natural instinct toward God and neighbor. This same tendency shows itself in a lack of willingness to make sacrifices and a growing inability to accept any form of delayed gratification.

An obsession with self can be a warning sign pointing to a false or skewed sense of holiness. For example, preoccupation with scruples and guilt drive us further into our personal cocoon and can tend to insulate us from the healing and honesty we are ultimately craving. True holiness leads us from God to neighbor – without forgetting to take care of ourselves in a healthy way: “Love the Lord your God with all your heart, all your mind and all your soul... and your NEIGHBOR as YOURSELF” (Luke 10:27). Life, joy and fulfillment can never be about me alone, but flow from a relationship with God, and then from God to neighbor. This is an important correction to dangerous elements of some present attitudes toward faith and spirituality, especially what is sometimes called the “prosperity Gospel.”

All of this focus on “me and mine” was totally alien to Father Solanus. Admittedly, the spiritual environment of his day was different than ours today. Yet, ultimately in every time and place there are life challenges which purify us spiritually.

Solanus Casey was rooted in a Catholic culture that was firmly grounded in prayer and trust in God and which almost naturally flowed over into charity toward one’s neighbor. All times and cultures have had to deal with the temptation to selfishness, and the Casey family (even with sixteen children) was not exempt from that temptation. Their deep Irish Catholic faith, however, gave them the tools to navigate around selfishness in a way which kept their focus on God and their neighbor (brother or sister, mother or father.) Here is where Father Solanus began his journey to true holiness.

COMMUNION THROUGH EUCHARISTIC PRAYER

My own personal relationship with Father Solanus Casey began when I was a Capuchin Franciscan Novice in Huntington, Indiana, in 1970. Thanks to the Second Vatican Council which had ended just a few years before, our Catholic understanding of spirituality, holiness and piety were evolving in new directions and with renewed energy.

Father Solanus had spent 10 years in Huntington before he returned to Detroit the year before he died (1957). In Huntington, devotion to Father Solanus continued after his death, and when we novices would take our turn answering the door we would meet people reporting favors received from Father Solanus, or asking for prayer cards and other information on him. As an impressionable novice it animated my desire to be a “holy Friar.”

After my Ordination in 1980, I spent 27 years working in Central America. A “missionary” vocation of this type was not something I dreamed of or planned on. It happened in response to a need to which I was willing to respond and was (as I see it now) a wonderful way in which God led me to grow in holiness in the way He wanted me to grow, and not in the way I might have chosen: by living with, serving and being Church with “a larger Church I never knew or expected to meet.”

Most of our ministry and life in Central America was supported by the Capuchin Mission Office in Detroit and in a special way through the Capuchin Mass Association. I was fully aware that the thousands who used the Capuchin Mass Association cards upon the death of a loved one or for other special occasions were following what Fr. Solanus frequently recommended to anyone who came to him with health or other concerns for themselves or a loved one. “Let’s sign them up in the Mass Association,” he said, adding, “they will be united with and receive the prayers and Masses of 1500 Capuchin Missionaries throughout the world! Being united with that powerful prayer will certainly help them.”

I grew to appreciate the faith of Father Solanus in the power of personal prayer joined to the prayer of the larger community, and particularly the powerful graces of prayer united with the celebration of the Eucharist. Even now I am deeply moved by the memory of the Eucharists celebrated with dedicated communities of the faithful in Central America, young and old, some who walked an hour or two in mud and rain through jungles and threats of war to

participate. They taught me how much I needed to learn about humility and sacrifice – and the joyful gratitude for God's blessings. These were the prayers and Masses that Father Solanus encouraged people to trust in as sources of spiritual assistance in their need. It has shaped and formed my own spirituality, and the link between my personal prayer and the needs of the wider world and Church: God, neighbor and ourselves.

After returning from Central America in 2009, I was asked to work at the Solanus Casey Center in Detroit and became the Director later that year, remaining in Detroit until 2016. I always felt it was a way of "paying back" Father Solanus for that important support for the missions that he inspired.

In 2012 I was asked to include in my responsibilities the task of Vice Postulator for the Cause of Father Solanus. This involved following up on the many

favors attributed to Father Solanus and searching for that favor, that definitive sign from God, that would be the evidence for the Church to declare with confidence that the Servant of God, Venerable Solanus Casey, is indeed in the presence of God in heaven. This year in May, after the canonical investigation of one such favor received at the tomb of Father Solanus, the Holy Father signed the decree for the Beatification of the Servant of God, Venerable Solanus Casey.

SOLANUS CENTER IN DETROIT

My time at the Solanus Center and working on the Cause of Father Solanus allowed me to enter more fully into the wider dimensions of the holiness of this Capuchin brother. It also led me to understand from a new perspective our own Capuchin Franciscan spirituality and the challenges we face living our heritage in our present cultural reality. It

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is a rich heritage founded by our Seraphic Father and founder, Saint Francis of Assisi, and carried on for centuries by the holy men and women of the Franciscan Family including Solanus. The tradition, and its expressions of holiness, evolved from age to age, and it is our privilege to make sure that it is embodied in a credible way for the people of our day.

I came to appreciate the way the architectural design of the Solanus Casey Center actually models a path to that kind of credible holiness that we instinctively crave and which our world so desperately needs. The way the Solanus Center is designed leads not to Father Solanus but to Christ. In the process of the pilgrimage to Christ one moves through the Center and learns how important the practical love of neighbor was to the faith and spirituality of Father Solanus and to the faith and witness of so many holy men and women who have gone ahead of us and will come after us.

The design of the Center begins at the Shepherd's Gate (see John 10:7-10) and leads through Jesus into our relationship with creation through a garden with sculptures designed by artists from various religious traditions. A very important theological point is made by this architectural decision: just as we are bonded together by our common dependence on creation, so too we are all bonded together as brothers and sisters dependent on God. The fact that we all live on the same planet and depend on its future brings new and deeper vitality to our understanding of our common Creator and our identity as neighbors.

Having entered the Center, the pilgrim visitor is immediately confronted by contemporary states of men and women who embody this reality: neighbors like us, who found Christ on their journeys and so inspire us on our journey. They were chosen because they embodied the Beatitudes: Mother Teresa of Calcutta, Dr. Martin Luther King, Mahatma Gandhi, Msgr. Clement Kern, a beloved Detroit pastor who worked with the poor, Rosa Parks, Dietrich Bonhoeffer and of course, Father Solanus. We learn more of his story and how he loved God by care for

"neighbor" - first at home, on the farm with his large family; then as a prison guard, a logger, a streetcar conductor and finally as a Capuchin who met people at the door of the monastery, counseled and healed them and inspired others to extraordinary charity, seen today in the continuing ministry of the Capuchin Soup Kitchen.

Finally, from the tomb of Venerable Solanus one enters into the space of Church: communion with Christ through Baptism, in the Blessed Sacrament and of course surrounded by the giving and receiving of Christ's daily welcome – through us as friars – of all in need in body or spirit. Architecturally it is all woven together. I enjoyed and felt graced to lead pilgrims again and again on this journey – each time having it touch my own soul.

THE "SCIENCE" OF RELIGION

Father Solanus lived at a time (not unlike our own) in which science and technology were growing exponentially, influencing all of life and eventually infiltrating culture itself. So naturally, he spoke of religion as a "science." Fr. Solanus defined religion as the "science of our happy relationship with God and neighbor." He feared that in people's obsession with the other sciences, this most basic "science" was being dangerously called into question.

Fr. Solanus lived through the development of the atomic bomb and its eventual explosion. During his life he came to sense that science together with political philosophy was becoming a new kind of "god" that led not only to overt atheism but also to practical atheism as well. (He famously offered a million dollar reward to the person who could prove there is no God.) For all these reasons, when he speaks of religion as a "science" he is trying to reclaim the place of faith and religion in culture, placing it on a higher plane than these new and growing sciences. His understanding of faith and religion and their relation to the general culture was far deeper than a back- and- forth discourse of current political and theological trends. For Fr. Solanus, faith in God and its expression in religion

are intimately linked to our relationship with our neighbor.

Fr. Solanus' vocation to priesthood and religious life is ultimately linked to a traumatic encounter with the absence of respect for God and love of neighbor. As a streetcar conductor in Superior, Wisconsin young Bernie Casey was forced to stop one day because of a small crowd of people on the tracks. When he and his crew got out of the streetcar to investigate what was happening, he discovered a young woman bleeding to death after having been stabbed by a drunken sailor because she had rejected his advances. The experience upset him so much that he spent that entire night in prayer before the Blessed Sacrament in the local parish church. That night of prayer led to his discernment of a call to the priesthood. It appears that he discerned it not only in response to that immediate experience of violence but also to the daily violence and seeming lack of faith and morals that he encountered in his work as a prison guard in Stillwater, Minnesota and elsewhere.

We can trace the development of Fr. Solanus' understanding of religion as a relationship with and a dependence on God and neighbor from early on in his life. Experiences of family life marked his faith and his continuing growth in holiness in his priestly and Capuchin vocations; he always stayed close to his extended family and corresponded with them on a regular basis. He knew instinctively that family members were a person's first and abiding "neighbors," our window to the loving Lord.

At the Solanus Casey Center there is a large banner with a quote of Father Solanus which states that a "Capuchin's lot is with the poor." The seeds of Solanus' care and compassion with the poor started with his own family. His parents were both Irish immigrants: "the dirty Irish" as the dominant Protestant culture of the day would often tag them. The Irish, like many immigrant groups, experienced the effects of prejudice. Catholics in Ireland were

accustomed to it. Fr. Solanus always referred to his maternal grandfather as a "martyr for the Eucharist." Years earlier in Northern Ireland, men from the town were in the Catholic parish church attending 40 hours devotion when the Protestant "Orangemen" surrounded the Church, torched it, and clubbed to death those who fled. Fr. Solanus' grandfather was among those victims.

As immigrants, the Casey's struggled economically, starting in Boston and then trying their hand at farming in Wisconsin. It was not easy: one year there was a drought and they lost all their crops; another year a fire hit the farm and burned down the barn; and yet another year a diphtheria epidemic hit and took the life of two of Fr. Solanus' younger sisters. He also contracted the disease but survived.

Later, with a large family contending with economic difficulties, in an effort to help support them he left home to find a paying job.

Struggles, obstacles and more prejudice followed him even into his Seminary days. It was not easy being part of the early wave of non-Germans in a very German church (both the Milwaukee Seminary where he first attended, and later the Detroit Capuchins, were highly German).

The struggles, the poverty, the heaviness of work, the illness and death, along with the joy of family and faith – all of these left deep impressions on the mind and experience of young Bernie Casey. They ultimately strengthened his faith and they gave him a profound capacity for compassion toward others as well as a desire to help them find strength in that same Faith.

I began this article with the hope of exploring the roots of what I proposed as a threefold dimension of authentic holiness in the spirituality of Blessed Solanus: God, neighbor and sacrifice.

True holiness and authentic closeness to God deepen our sensitivity to the suffering of our neighbors and lead to a generous, heartfelt and authentically



compassionate response. This was very true of Solanus.

We have seen Solanus' firm faith in the relationship between God and neighbor, the heart of which he understood as the "science of religion."

SACRIFICE: THE BOND CONNECTING US WITH GOD

But where does sacrifice fit into this? It is the thread that binds the love of God and neighbor, and explains the salvific act of Christ on the Cross, which restores our relationship with God and with our neighbors as brothers and sisters of the one God and Father.

At the heart of authentic sacrifice is genuine love. God is love, and we believe that Jesus' love of his

Father and us motivated him to embrace the Cross. What else but love could empower and sustain someone to accept such suffering of body and spirit?

Solanus understood sacrifice. The spiritual environment of his day, unlike our own, encouraged and fostered spiritual asceticism in the very structure of common life. Stories of exaggerated asceticism can be heard from many religious who lived through that era. In the wake of Vatican II, many ascetical practices were rightly reformed as well as liturgy and religious life. However, the question remains perennially valid: What role does asceticism play in religious life? The example of Solanus answers the question with great simplicity: true asceticism is sacrifice for the other present before us.

Since the 1960's, the cultural disdain for delayed gratification has grown. Sacrifice makes sense only if there is a higher goal worthy of our life and energy. Such a vision and commitment can easily disappear when our primary goal is simply to "enjoy life."

We remember Solanus for his deep faith in God (prayer and mysticism) and love of neighbor (the Soup Kitchen and the sick and the poor). But all this was rooted in something we can easily forget: sacrifice. When people came to him for advice or healing, that was his consistent counsel: sacrifice. He mirrored it in the constant giving of his own life. His days were filled with a constant stream of people seeking his advice, prayers and help as they faced physical, financial, emotional and spiritual suffering. Often, at the end of these long days, he would be found late into the night kneeling before the Blessed Sacrament praying for all these souls. Not infrequently the friars would come into the chapel for Morning Prayer and find him asleep on the floor there in front of the cross and the Blessed Sacrament.

It was a sacrifice for Blessed Solanus to give up a good night's rest for the good of these souls, even if he joked with the brothers that he had "found the soft side of the board." He asked those who came to him to make some sacrifice as a sign to God of their

sincerity, as a sign of their thanks to God even “ahead of time.” He promised to add his own prayers and sacrifices to theirs, and he did.

Sacrifice and the willingness to sacrifice are at the heart of true love. Consider parents who spend days, weeks, even their whole lives caring for a sick child. One sees it in children who readjust their lives, their time and their homes to care for elderly parents or other family members. All these things – great and small – happen because there is awareness of the mystery of a greater love; the love of the Lord Jesus.

In religious life, a superior can appeal to obedience. But such a request makes sense only if there is in the heart of the religious a greater love or motive (a deep dedication to the Kingdom and of God). Conversely, the sacrifices demanded by true obedience will be difficult (or become bitter) if one is absorbed in personal agenda.

Seeing the sacrifice at the heart of the holiness of Solanus is a challenge for us today. Sacrifice often gets left out of the equation. It was never left out in the path of holiness of Solanus. The question is: what do we do with the challenges in our contemporary quest for holiness? Does sacrifice still have a place? If it does, what would it look like today?

At the beginning of this article I expressed the hope that this article might plant a seed in the hearts of readers: may each of us walk the path of holiness set before us, the way of self-sacrifice as it may be asked of us this very day!

There are many issues today facing humanity and the planet which demand the ability for sacrifice in order to make difficult changes in our attitudes and behaviors: the ecological realities of global warming along with the depletion of the resources of the Earth; population shifts as a result of human suffering, violence and economic inequality; the polarization of positions and attitudes. Unless we are capable of sacrifice and letting go of our own desires

for comfort and security there is little chance that we will have the capacity to make the changes that are necessary to seriously confront these challenges.

The last days of Fr. Solanus’ life summarized well the relationship between love of God, neighbor and sacrifice in his own spiritual journey. I was reminded of it recently as I was going through some relics held in the archives of the Cause of Venerable Solanus. In a clear plastic envelope I found a white sock that Fr. Solanus wore in the hospital in the days before he died. The sock is filled with stains from the fluids and blood that oozed from his legs and feet.

In his last days, as age was taking its toll, Fr. Solanus lay in the hospital suffering horribly from a skin disease that had afflicted him most of his life. His sister (Martha) later testified that two days before he died his legs were covered with sores that caused him horrible pain. When he was visited by one of his superiors the friar noted to Solanus how much he appeared to be suffering. He replied, “Thanks be to God. I’m offering my suffering that we might all be one. If only I could live to see the conversion of the World!” Later, when another friar visited and noted his suffering Fr. Solanus responded: “Would to God it were a thousand times worse!”

Solanus’ love of God and His Kingdom and his love of his brothers and sisters was so deep that he was willing to suffer all! Such was his path to holiness throughout his life. The way he died as a living sacrifice of love for God and others was the perfect summation of all that had preceded. He died rejoicing that he could finally and totally give his body and soul to Jesus Christ for the salvation of the world.

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION

1. Father Webber explained the spiritual testimony of Father Solanus Casey was built on the simple, traditional Gospel message of loving God and neighbor. What brought those two loves together for Solanus was his understanding and experience of love as self-sacrifice. The love of the crucified Lord motivated Solanus to an intense desire to pray and live in a selfless manner, being always available for anyone in need. Where does self-sacrifice fit in my own spiritual journey? How do I understand and embrace this virtue?
2. Father Solanus emphasized the importance of the celebration of the Holy Eucharist as the source of energy and healing which makes possible all ministry and which unites us beyond boundaries of space and time. Consider your own Eucharistic spirituality – participating enthusiastically in the celebration and spending time in contemplation before the Lord's presence. How might I deepen my appreciation of this great gift?
3. Personal experiences of tragedies and family sufferings helped Fr. Solanus realize his vocational call to serve the Church as a Capuchin Friar. Within that call came the special vocation of being the porter greeting all who came to the monastery with needs of body or spirit. Fr. Solanus is a great model of one who let his entire life be shaped by profound obedience of heart or full acceptance of all that was given (or not given). Do I live with that same spirit of "existential" obedience in my life?
4. As a Capuchin, Fr. Solanus lived in community and shared all things in common with his brothers. Undoubtedly he was extremely grateful for their loving support and their witness. Solanus understood that no one lived the Christian vocation in isolation. Do I believe God is calling me – each day to an ever deeper sense of communion with Him by reverent love for every member of His mystical Body?



ABOUT THE AUTHOR

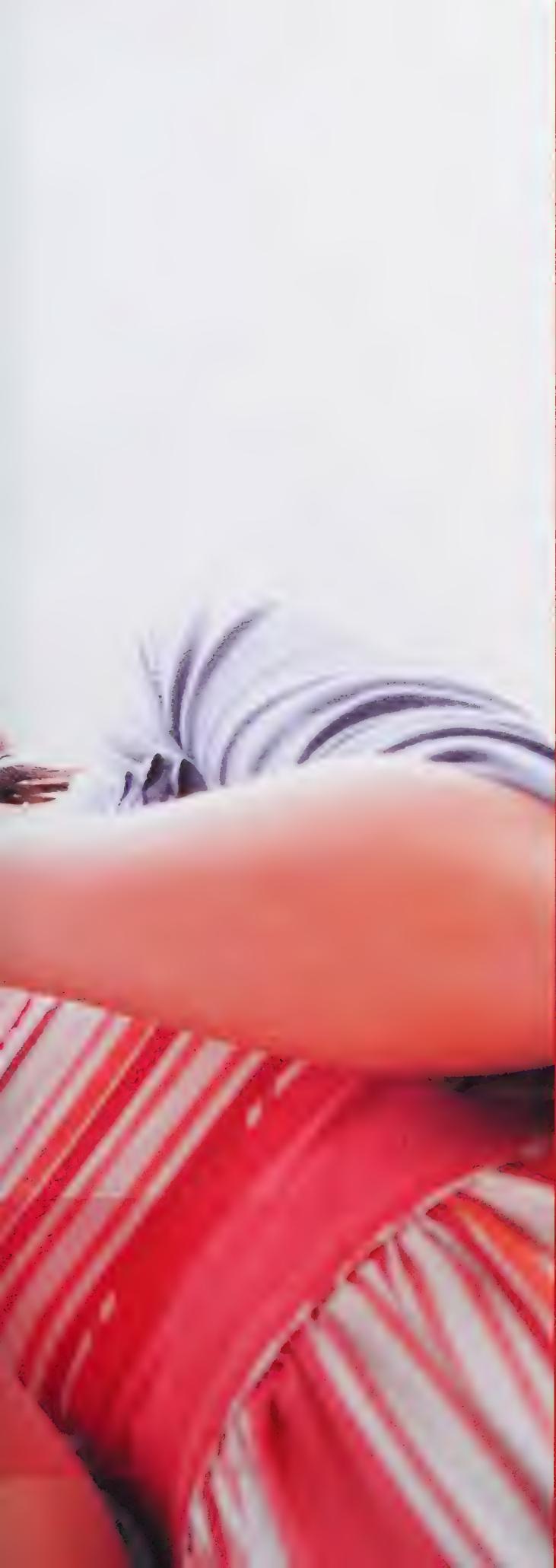
Larry Webber OFM Capuchin has been a member for 47 years of the Province of St. Joseph of the Capuchin Order with its headquarters in Detroit, MI. He was ordained in 1980 and since that time has worked in Central City, Milwaukee, 27 years in Central America, 7 years at the Solanus Casey Center in Detroit and presently works at St. Labre Parish on the Northern Cheyenne Reservation in Ashland, MT. For the last five years he has been a Vice Postulator of the Cause of Father Solanus Casey. He has done post graduate work in Spirituality at Catholic Theological Union in Chicago.



SAVED TOGETHER:

Ecumenism in a Shrinking World and a Stretching Universe

Bishop Richard Sklba



ON OCTOBER 31, 2017 the Christian world observes the five hundredth anniversary of Martin Luther's ninety-five theses. Historians warn that the date may not be precisely accurate and it should go without saying that we never "celebrate" ecclesial division. That is especially the case in something as bitter as the painful fracture in the Church a half millennium ago after Father Martin posted the serious and contentious topics concerning which he wanted open theological conversation and debate. At the time, some were delighted and rejoiced for it was indeed a moment of Biblical rediscovery and renewal. Nevertheless, things quickly unraveled with no small amount of confusion, pain and anger in ways Luther himself did not desire and could hardly have imagined. It is most appropriate, however, to acknowledge that unique historic and profoundly symbolic occasion with its long and sometimes lethal shadows

for the unity of the Church. The anniversary is also an opportunity to explore the contemporary ecumenical situation with all its differences, similarities and new opportunities. History unfolds in starts and stops. God's mysterious saving grace continues to be at work in our lives, no matter what messes we humans might create.

Today we sit down together in a very different world than was Martin's in 1517. From one perspective our world has grown smaller, dramatically so it would seem since that time, making folks on the other side of the globe virtually our neighbors any moment of the day or night. On the other hand, our sense of the outer edges of the universe has been extended so far out into space as to completely boggle the wildest fantasies of our human imagination. Ecumenism always takes place in the very real world of the present. Our "present" world, indeed shriveled but also wonderfully expanded, is so very different from that of the Augustinian priest named Father Martin. And yet, we pause to commemorate his actions with new but genuine respect, fraternal regret and hopeful openness to God's future.

Although Luther is famous for the personalism as expressed in the alleged quotation, "Here I stand, I cannot do otherwise," he always presumed the collective sense of Church as the Body of Christ which gave meaning to each baptized man or woman. The world has become larger and smaller and (unfortunately) much more individualistic since his day.

A SHRUNKEN WORLD

At 5:20 a.m. almost every morning my radio alarm signals the beginning of a new day. National Public Radio alerts me to a series of headlines alleging to report the "breaking news" of the dawn. A tragic fire in London ... another terrorist attack in Belgium or Baghdad ... the horrors of fighting in Iraq ... tornadoes and floods scattered across the fifty states of America ... a lone gunman barricaded in a very familiar city out West ... police under siege out

East ... and a terrible disaster or family heartache somewhere on the other shore of the Pacific Ocean. The litany of tragedies seems endless and everywhere. It really does seem as if we constantly wake to a very small and grim world day after day. To hear all those headlines without even a hint of good news should be deeply troubling, even if we have come to take it all for granted. Thus we are so very often jolted into daily consciousness with fleeting bits of "news" which ought to break our hearts.

The marvels of contemporary communication have thus resulted in a world grown so much smaller. Hardly more than a century ago the passage across the Atlantic Ocean took several weeks, depending on the wind and the weather. Papal letters of instruction or admonition might have taken months before their eventual arrival at their proper destination. Everyone had time to ponder things, and to craft a tempered response. Granted, there was a price to be paid for such lags in time and reply; things could easily worsen and human situations could become more toxic by delay ... but things could also somehow heal and resolve themselves naturally without outside intervention. Both situations were somehow the regular course of events.

The world has become so small and shrunken that the bad news of the whole planet pushes into our consciousness from the first moments of dawn. That reality is sometimes exacerbated, at least in my case, by a phone call later that morning from a breathless reporter asking if I have any reaction to the tragedy ... or any response to the Pope's comments regarding the event or disaster (whatever it may be ... and indeed before I've had an opportunity to read the reports, much less even understand the issue itself). Apparently in our modern world every heartache or disagreement demands a quick neighborly human reaction and so a familiar figure is sought "for comment." A local echo is thus quickly found before moving on to reporting the next item of "breaking news." That's the job of reporters, and that's what they are paid to do. They do bring us together in

unexpected ways. The modern world would be somehow lessened without them. We are left in a daze.

More measured reflection and further background to understand the situation often remains the victim to this breathless pace of contemporary communication. Bad news makes big headlines. Any more frail and fleeting report of human goodness is usually relegated to the last two minutes of the evening TV news.

THE VISION OF FAITH

By sharp contrast, however, when the TV cameras span crowds at summer baseball or autumn football games, we often catch a sign which simply heralds the citation John 3:16 in boldly confident script and without comment. The bearer smiles and waves his / her message. For Biblical cognoscenti, the communication is by contrast good news, namely, the announcement that ...

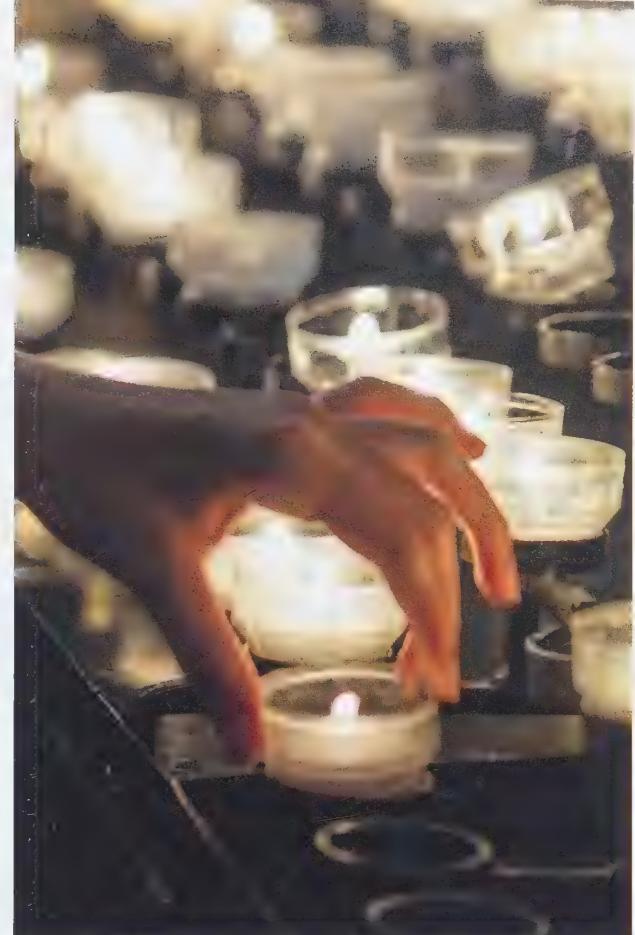
“God so loved the world (kosmos) that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him, might not perish, but might believe in him.”

The Biblicist in me inevitably hopes that the next verse (v.17) might someday also be added to the sign for further clarity and focus because the same Gospel text continues:

“For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but that the world might be saved through him.”

This is a citation which presumes the human bond across all ages and continents. The Word does inevitably address our deeper unity in unexpected ways. We are saved together.

The sign's message becomes even more pointed and powerful if one knows something of the biblical theology behind the citation. You see, in John's Gospel the word “world / kosmos” usually refers to the known world of his day ... beautifully



organized, attractively presented and very urbane. It refers to the external stuff whence comes the idea of “cosmetic” with its hint of positive and enhanced physical splendor. For John, however, that same *kosmos* was also judged negatively as fundamentally opposed to the Gospel of God's Loving Goodness. John perceived his surrounding “world” as one which rejected God's transcendent grace and subtly resisted the God of the Universe in every way possible. John therefore also conceived of his world as ultimately a harsh and dreadful place, no matter how nicely it might be dressed, but that inspired author was also convinced that his God not only judged the whole world, but loved it ... and loved it enough to embrace and heal its pain and division.

A UNIVERSE ALSO STRETCHED BEYOND MEASURE

Since the first human ventures into space only a few decades ago, we twenty-first century humans have also been forced to change our own implicit notion of the world. It is no longer merely astonishingly small and sometimes dangerous, but also gorgeously



colorful against the mysterious blackness of the vast universe, fragilely isolated and spinning in orbit. We now see that poster-view from outer space everywhere. As a result our scientific sense of wonder cannot imagine the planet as simply hostile or negative.

Successive issues of the familiar National Geographic magazine often invite us to picture our planet in the midst of a swirling galaxy of similar orbs spinning around our solar center. As if that were not enough for our fevered imaginations, we are instructed to ponder the scientific possibility of thousands or perhaps even millions of similar galaxies stretching across incomprehensibly vast space billions of light years away. We have become wide-eyed first graders again, ever transfixed by the wonder of it all. Our “united one world” is bigger than we even imagined!

To the ancient Biblical world, stars were understood as benign angels of light, luminous and living, busy about the task of patrolling the night sky in watchful vigilance on behalf of human beings. To that mind, if anything moved, it must somehow be alive! To us so-called “moderns,” however, those stars now represent distant universes each containing who-knows what type of creatures. The imaginations of twenty-first century science fiction devotees can only begin to

conjure what such worlds might hold. The more creative among us have even begun to wonder if the universe itself might not have a life of its own?

Our globe may be shrinking as a result of all our modes of instant communication, but our galaxy and all those around us have also been expanding to breathless dimensions by the probes of modern astronomical science. The human vision is illuminated by the wonder of our faith and the dimensions of our belief in the cosmic Christ of the Universe. As people of faith we are somehow reunited at the very core of our existence.

ECUMENICAL IMAGINATION

If our sense of natural space and geography has been dramatically both shrunken and stretched, something similar has occurred in the universe of inter-church relationships. The religious world of the Middle Ages was a colorful patchwork of local beliefs and practices. At the same time the distant though luxuriant figure of the Pope in Rome was a source of unity for the many tribes, kingdoms and languages of their inhabited world. However much they might squabble and fight, even maim and rob, they also shared a living bond which held them together at some profound and mysteriously sacramental fashion. They all belonged to the single

family of Adam and Eve, bound together in the Body of Christ.

Over the centuries, however, some very serious fractures had occurred in that vast fabric which we called Christendom. Early on, some communities of the East broke away at the time of the First Council of Nicea (325 A.D.) because they simply could not accept a description of the full mystery of Christ in non-Biblical language. Then the relationship of the East and the West, long frayed by differing social structures and world views, reached a final tragic impasse in 1204 A.D. when marauding groups of so-called Christian Crusaders paused on their way to “liberate” the Holy Land from Arab invaders. They proceeded to rape the ancient city of Constantinople for food and gold. The rage of the East in some circles continues to be a tragic and enduring monument to that evil, even to this day. Sin sometimes projects a terribly long shadow over the human family.

Then the individualism of the Renaissance with its burst of scientific discoveries and surging national loyalties further cracked the façade of Christian unity. Religious disagreements, often exploited by political greed and enflamed by papal decadence, gradually and lethally divided the nations of the sixteenth century. The world had become severely fractured with the Christian religion as its sad justification and protection. “Love one another” was for us, not “them!” A new and deeper form of individualism took root in our human consciousness.

The religious globe had thus been broken into ever smaller pieces. Each shard became its own tiny world, often isolated from neighbors of differing religious persuasion and finally bitterly and mutually antagonistic. So many worlds of faith became shrunken and sharply divided. Those divisions then became ingrained in our psyches. As a child I was even warned about entering a Protestant church for fear of what secret spiritual poison I might encounter therein. In utter honesty, for years I was even put

off by the expectation of my public grade school teachers that we might enjoy singing “Away in a Manger” at Christmas time, because I had learned that it was composed by Martin Luther! The words didn’t exactly stick in my throat, but it was somehow like creamed corn which I never liked very much. I now smile at the memory.

SLOW FIRST STEPS TOWARD RESTORED CHRISTIAN UNITY

Over a century ago, however, the Christian world gradually became aware once again that this religious division was profoundly contrary to the Will of God. Such deep disunity in faith was slowly even acknowledged as sinful. Christ’s prayer for unity (John 17) gradually permeated the human conscience of our pastors. God’s grace somehow began to elicit more positive responses to neighboring non Catholic congregations and churches unimaginable to our earlier generations. We were once again summoned by God to be one in faith and charity.

Liturgical studies, for example, led Protestant groups to rediscover the central ancient role of the Eucharist in their communal life, and to rebalance the Word with Sacrament. Catholics began to embrace their Scriptures in new ways. Biblical scholars of many different ecclesial persuasions found that the Word was rooted in their communities which in fact shared common Christian convictions. They respected serious work everywhere and no longer labeled each other’s work as simply Lutheran, Anglican or Catholic. Historians were gradually able to set aside their sectarian spectacles to find new threads of theological unity amid the generations of human religious experience. At least ninety-five percent of our religious beliefs were recognized as held in common, and the more curious began to explore the rest for its true weight and value.

In 1908 the Graymoor Fathers began their annual octave of prayer for Christian Unity each January. In



1910 Protestant missionaries, very conscious of the obstacle to the conversion of their African novices posed by Christian schisms, summoned the Great Missionary Conference of Edinburgh to put aside the doctrinal squabbles of the European Continent and provide a new more unified voice for Christian evangelization. Then the World Council of Churches was formed in Geneva and met for the first time in 1948.

In 1962 Pope Saint John XXIII convened the Second Vatican Council for three soaring purposes: *first* the renewal of the Catholic Church, *secondly* the reunion of renewed Christian Churches and *thirdly* the transformation of the modern world. It was a grand vision which captured the hearts and imaginations of the entire world. Paradoxically, these were the same years when Christians also discovered that the horrors of the Nazi concentration camps, almost unimaginable in their evil, had also wrought a new level of mutual respect among the desperate internees who could never return to the prior world of religious division and mutual distrust or contempt.

It was a new and larger world into which fresh levels of ecumenical conversation and religious exploration began to flourish. New formally approved inter-church dialogues began the slow process of rediscovering the fundamental unity in Christ they shared at the depths of their faith-existence. At the same time that attitude of fresh and respectful openness also spun off a new degree of interest in formal conversation with the various major non Christian religions of the world.

FORMAL LUTHERAN - CATHOLIC DIALOGUES

One of the oldest and perhaps the most serious ecumenical conversations was inaugurated between Lutherans and Catholics. In our country they began anew in 1965. Since I was privileged to co-chair two subsequent rounds of that national dialogue (1998-2010), I may well be prejudiced as I review the

journey and assess its accomplishments, but those discussions were truly significant and substantial. Over the past thirty years, our primary partner in this conversation was the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (ELCA), though representatives from the Lutheran Church / Missouri Synod were also present and fully engaged scholars.

The successive topics were initially chosen by the two major participating Churches working in unison. Six or seven men and women scholars from each Church were officially appointed for their theological expertise in the subject at hand. The group met for an extended weekend twice a year to explore the given issue, to write serious papers on the topic and gradually to formulate their common conclusions regarding whether any of the differences as experienced today were truly serious enough to break ecclesial communion. Every single word was carefully parsed by these theological experts. Each final report was the result of the universal consensus of the participants. The most basic tenets of our common Christian faith were explored first, and the groups gradually worked up to considering the more neuralgic of our arguments over the centuries. A glass of wine at the end of the day and some teasing laughter about each others' personal foibles certainly helped the discussions. In the course of each round, we became very good friends, inevitably respecting the depth of each other's faith and always rediscovering our profound unity in Christ.

We made it a point to attend each other's churches every time we met, gathering in a neighboring Catholic parish for a Saturday afternoon Mass of anticipation, and again the next morning at a nearby Sunday Lutheran worship. Each time one of us would rise to introduce ourselves and our purpose. We carefully explained that, while our entire group would come forward at Communion time, we would refrain from actually receiving in each other's church because we had not as yet achieved that official level of reconciliation needed to share that Sacrament. Since the reunion of our Churches could only be a

gift from God, not any mere human achievement, we always asked their prayers for our work.

Eleven formal statements of theological agreement and Lutheran / Catholic convergence were produced in this fashion over the past half century of these official American ecumenical dialogues. Listing the titles of each successive final report may be helpful in charting the history of our recent ecumenical journey: *The Status of the Nicene Creed as Dogmas of the Church* (1965); *One Baptism for the Remission of Sins* (1966); *The Eucharist as Sacrifice* (1967); *Eucharist and Ministry* (1970); *Papal Primacy and the Universal Church* (1974); *Teaching Authority and Infallibility in the Church* (1980); *Justification by Faith* (1985); *The One Mediator, the Saints and Mary* (1992); *Scripture and Tradition* (1995); *The Church as Koinonia of Salvation – Its Structures and Ministry* (2005) and (most recently) *The Hope of Eternal Life* (2011).

As you may have noticed in perusing that litany, the time frames gradually became longer between reports as the topics were judged more complex and the historical disagreements deeper. The last topic listed above was selected at the insistence of the more senior and experienced members of those dialogues because they knew that a final review was necessary to lay a firm foundation for the future, however it might yet unfold. Our conclusion, shared in fact by all the dialogue members from each church, was a conviction that the arguments of the sixteenth century, bitter as they may have been at times even regarding such topics as indulgences and purgatory, were judged when correctly understood as “no longer church-dividing.” Often wisdom culled from the writings of then Cardinal Ratzinger proved to be the clinching arguments toward our final agreement.

The historical *Joint Declaration of the Doctrine of Justification* signed by the Lutheran World Federation and representatives of the Holy Father on October 31, 1999 signaled and celebrated a renewed bond of faith between our Churches.

New topics, at times again painfully neuralgic, have of course arisen since the days of Luther five hundred years ago and since the work of the Council of Trent later that century. On the Lutheran side, for example, issues of gender and sexuality in ministry (especially in the American scene) have been highly debated, even at times also painfully within Lutheran circles. On the Catholic side moreover, dogmatic decisions regarding the Immaculate Conception (1854) or the Assumption of Mary (1950) might in fact be believed by many Lutherans, but when made an obligatory dogma of faith by formal Catholic Church decision in an ecumenical council ... well, that's quite another matter! Certainly the Infallibility of the Pope (1869), however carefully the question might be articulated and limited, if suddenly a doctrine of the Church, may need additional ecumenical conversation. Those differences matter, but they now exist against the background of serious and substantial agreement. Nevertheless, contemporary Catholics and Lutherans live in a very different world than that of our religious ancestors five hundred years ago and ever since. A new level of unity has been rediscovered and affirmed.

A few years ago, the official American Lutheran / Catholic Dialogue chose as the topic for its next (twelfth) round of formal ecumenical conversation the question of how each Church makes its major faith-decisions. Thus, rather than study each of the remaining questions mentioned above (some of which already tangentially explored in earlier conversations), it seemed wise to step back and look at the process of doctrinal or moral development in each group. Granted the imbalance between a global Church such as Catholicism and a more nationally focused group such as Lutheranism, I still thought the selection of such an issue ingenuous if not almost inspired. It seemed a very promising approach to discussing if not actually resolving our remaining ecumenical differences and disagreements.

Unfortunately, at least from my perspective, a series of developments within the dialogue itself resulted

In a universe both shrunken and astonishingly expanded, we gather around God's ecumenical table as friends and newly rediscovered relatives in faith. We now exist in real if imperfect communion.

in a recess and in the selection of a completely new topic. In all candor, I was and remain disappointed on that score, but I also recognize that God has repeatedly moved in unexpected directions which have produced marvelous fruit. The work of ecumenism is after all God's work ... and it is always and forever "marvelous in our eyes" (Psalm 118:23).

JOURNEYING INTO GOD'S FUTURE FOR THE CHURCH

In a universe both shrunken and astonishingly expanded, we gather around God's ecumenical table as friends and newly rediscovered relatives in faith. *We now exist in real if imperfect communion.* Over the past five hundred years each of the various Christian Churches has reclaimed the specific grace which it brings to that ecumenical table. The idea of respective gifts was that of the late Catholic ecumenist Margaret O'Gara whose summons (in 2015) to the heavenly banquet was far too premature, at least from my limited human perspective. That proposal of hers, fashioned in the many conversations at the end of intense dialogue meetings, continues to capture the deeper truth, namely that the historical divisions into a splintered Christianity, now approaching half a millennium and painful as they may have been, now gradually being healed, curiously also have produced blessings more numerous than we can even begin to count.

Each Church has had ample time, for example, to hone its own theological perspective and wrap its gift. Thus Lutheranism when firmly held continues to bring a sharp sense of human justification as pure gift

of God's grace. Calvinism stands back in awe at the utter transcendence of God. Anglicanism offers its treasure of respect for communal prayer, especially at Lauds and Vespers. Orthodoxy celebrates the luminous reality of the Divine Liturgy. The Baptist tradition revels in the fundamental sacrament of initiation which perfuses everything. Catholicism lifts up a view of creation as somehow shot through by transforming sacramental grace and a sense of the deeper unity of faith which holds all human cultures together in global solidarity. See the trajectory and complete the list for yourself.

Our respective doctrinal convictions are thus more important than we could ever have imagined. They are ultimately complimentary, not divisive. Moreover, the differences themselves have in fact also contributed to the task of human development. Our narrow ecclesial divisions and ancient passions have momentarily but eventually praised God in ways we could never have imagined. Perhaps that is the great gift of the new ecumenical conversations which spanned the past century or more. God is praised by our differences as well as by our unity. We are truly saved together!

In the end, it is always the mystery of God's grace which holds us together and shapes our future. As the great Irenaeus of Lyon opined at the end of the second century, "the glory of God is humanity fully alive." I might also add, "and fully reunited." The new if still tenuous religious unity of the Christian world reflects both the diversity and the cohesion of God's material creation around us and within us.



Perhaps we need to be a bit more patient with our human disagreements ... all of them, petty or major as they might be ... of whatever nature ... political, theological, social or even merely those of cultural taste. God is always if mysteriously served by our human efforts to seek the truth, even when disagreeing and at sad times disagreeable.

The point of this long and sometimes painful ecumenical journey over the past half millennium toward full and final ecclesial reconciliation is the rediscovery that we are truly saved together. The radical individualism of our contemporary Western society was and is somehow always contrary to God's will for the world. Reclaiming a sense of social salvation will bring us back more clearly to the mentality of our ancient ancestors in faith. We are ourselves at our very best when we are bound together in faith and charity.

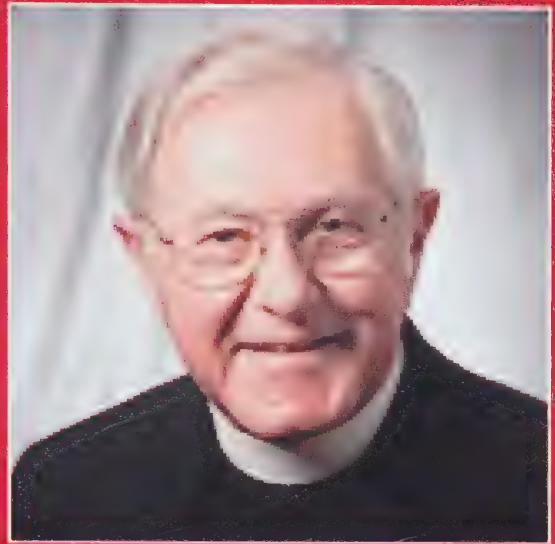
The People of Israel know that God had chosen them and promised to save them as a people. Individual persons are first members of their respective family,

and only then personal objects of God's loving salvation. They were saved together. "You will be my people," said the Lord, "and I will be your God" (Jeremiah 7:23).

In a world both shattered and shrunken as well as extended and stretched beyond our wildest dreams, that sense of solidarity with our God and with each other remains one of the most potent cures for all the ailments of our human global community. The recent ecumenical journey toward the reclaiming of our unity in faith is a model. In a bitterly divided culture such as our own contemporary American social and political scene, ecumenism offers a way forward and provides a pattern for success. Any serious effort to understand human differences is therapeutic. It really is God's work in and for our modern world.

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION

1. In poetic imagery, Bishop Sklba describes the mystery of our times – a shrinking world yet a stretching universe. He also presents a sweeping overview of the history of Christianity’s struggle to explain and celebrate our salvation in Christ. He reminds us of the breadth and depth of space and time and how the grace of Incarnation continues to be manifest in the midst of all these things. Meditate on your own unique and intimate experience of Christ while noting how it also necessarily includes the cosmic dimensions of His presence and love. Do you sense in yourself and your prayer a movement stirring you to greater concern for the unity of Christians and the welfare of people everywhere?
2. As you reflect on Bishop Sklba’s essay, do you detect within yourself any “stubbornness of heart” regarding other Christians? Do you pray for the salvation of all Christians, even the salvation of all people of good will?
3. What can we do personally or in our parishes or institutions to promote ecumenism?
4. On a Sunday morning, as you drive past crowded parking lots of other Christian Churches, do you pray with joy, gratitude and hope for them?



ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Bishop Richard Sklba, retired Auxiliary Bishop of Milwaukee, studied at the Pontifical Gregorian University, Pontifical Biblical Institute and the Angelicum. Since his ordination as a Bishop 38 years ago, besides service within his own Archdiocese, the Bishop has been active in leadership roles with the USCCB in Ecumenical Interreligious Affairs and, as mentioned in his article, was co-chair of the National Lutheran/Catholic Dialogue from 1998 through 2010.



THROUGH CENTERING PRAYER INTO COMMUNION WITH ALL MYSTERY

Father Thomas Keating



The essence and heart of Centering Prayer is consenting to God's presence and action within. It leads to contemplation and its continuing development. The following qualities reveal how this consent deepens through daily practice.

1. **SILENCE** arises in consenting to God's presence within. External silence supports this movement and leads to interior silence.
2. **SOLITUDE** flows from interior silence. It disregards the endless conversation we have with ourselves and rests in the experience of God's presence.
3. **SOLIDARITY** is the growing awareness of our oneness with the whole human family and with all creation. It is sensitive to the ever-present inspirations of the Spirit, not only during the time of formal prayer, but in the details of everyday life.
4. **SERVICE** is an expression of solidarity that is an inner call to serve God and others based on the realization that God is loving and serving them through us. In other words, God in us is serving God in others.



5. STILLNESS is what Jesus called “prayer in secret” (Matt. 6.6). This is the experience of God’s presence beyond rational concepts and beyond preoccupation with our own thoughts and desires. Interior silence tends to move into solitude and then into stillness. Stillness is the habitat of contemplative prayer. As Saint John of the Cross teaches, contemplation is the inflowing of God into our souls, and in the Christian tradition, is looked upon as pure gift. In actual fact, it is a gift that has already been given. Just by being human, one has this capacity. Many advanced mystics affirm that contemplation is the natural state of human consciousness, of which the Garden of Eden in Genesis is a symbol.

6. SIMPLICITY is the growing capacity to live in the midst of the dualities of daily life in such a way as to integrate contemplation and action. Even in enormous activity, endless distraction, and immense concerns, we can remain in the divine presence. That presence invites us to enter the inmost center of our being where God dwells and where the Spirit

inspires all our actions. Simplicity is the final integration and unification of all our human capabilities. It is the peak sustained by a whole mountain of interconnected and interdependent parts, in which each acts according to its particular nature in complete harmony with every other part. Simplicity arises out of the immense complexity of human nature as it is brought into unity through letting go of attachments and trusting in God.

The first step toward this simplicity is simplicity of lifestyle and the cultivation of interior silence through contemplation. Contemplative prayer and action under its influence gradually liberates us from attachments both conscious and unconscious that cause the loss of interior peace. It moderates the tumultuous emotions that can tear us apart and undermine the sense of being rooted in God and in the state of life we have embraced.

Contemplation is not the same as action, but they are not separate. They are distinct, but God is as much in one as in the other. It is we who may not be present to one or the other. Simplicity is based on the truth about ourselves and the experience of God. It is the acceptance of everything just as it is. The Holy Spirit can then move us to change what needs to be changed or do what needs to be done.

7. ABSOLUTE SURRENDER is the total gift of self to God, a movement from divine union to unity. It marks the beginning of what Jesus calls “eternal life” as an abiding state of consciousness. Self-surrender through the practice of the method of Centering Prayer is a traditional path to divine union. The movements of self-surrender and trust are the work of the Fruits and Gifts of the Spirit, and of the increasing joy of giving oneself completely to God.

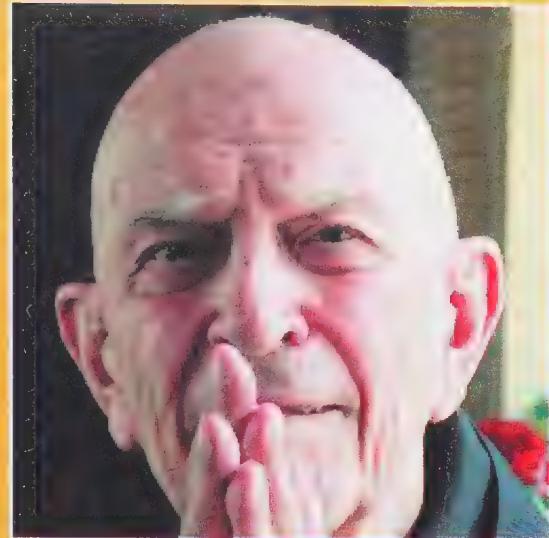
Knowing the Ultimate Reality as Unmanifest is to lose oneself completely. This is the invitation of the amazing texts in Saint John's Gospel about our being in God and God living in us. (cf. Jn 17: 20-22).

Suffering is the consequence of the fact of living in an imperfect world. For that there is no cure. Sharing the divine life does not mean that created things are not good; it is just that they are incapable of fulfilling our boundless desire for perfect happiness. Nothing could be more down to earth or more humbling than this ever-present Presence, which just is. It does not have to prove itself. It does not need to acquire anything. It just is. Its desire is to make us equal to itself in the expanding interior freedom that goes with that unity.

As we experience the dynamic unfolding of grace, our perspective changes in regard to God, the spiritual journey, and ourselves. In between these stages there may be delightful plateaus which are great blessings and have huge physical, mental, and spiritual effects. The dark nights are psychological states, and the darkest of all is the spiritual suffering that arises from being a creature, unable because of our weakness to handle the difficulties we encounter in this life, but going through them with invincible confidence in God's infinite mercy.

REFLECTION QUESTION

Fr. Keating has devoted his ministry as a cloistered Trappist Monk to writing about and living "centering prayer." He offers us this "distillation" of the process and experience which takes us both inward and outward. Consider how this practice teaches us and empowers us for communion with the Lord and all members of His Body.



ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Father Thomas Keating was born in New York City in 1914. He attended Yale University and Fordham and entered the Claretian Order in Valley Falls, Rhode Island in 1940. He was appointed Superior of St. Benedict's Monastery, Snowmass, Colorado in 1958, and was elected abbot of St. Joseph's Abbey, Spencer, Massachusetts in 1961. He returned to Snowmass after serving as abbot of Spencer in 1981, where he established a program of ten-day intensive retreats in the practice of Centering Prayer, a contemporary form of the Christian contemplative tradition.

He is one of the founders of the Centering Prayer movement and of Contemplative Outreach, Ltd., and is its spiritual guide. Contemplative Outreach is a spiritual network that reaches Centering Prayer and provides a support system for those who practice it.

Fr. Keating is a former chairman of the Monastic Interreligious Dialogue which sponsors exchanges between monks and nuns of the world religions. He is a member of the International Committee for Peace Council which fosters dialogue and cooperation among the world religions and a member of the Snowmass Interreligious Conference, a group of leaders from the world religions who meet yearly to share their experience of the spiritual journey in their respective traditions.

Fr. Keating is the author of many books and several video/audio tape series. His books include: Open Mind, Open Heart, The Mystery of Christ, Invitation to Love, Intimacy with God, Crisis of Faith, Crisis of Love, Awakenings, Reawakenings, The Human Condition, Fruits and Gifts of the Spirit, The Better Part, Consenting to God as God Is, and, most recently, World Without End.



FAMILY: GOD'S WAY TO US AND OUR WAY TO GOD

Janet Diaz, D. Min.



Of all the social units that impact our personal development, marriage and family exercise a very powerful influence over us. Our childhood and adolescent histories and our experiences in married life, shape who we are and how we relate to God and others. Like houses built on rock, healthy families are solid foundations of life-giving values, affirmative self-images, and a positive approach to relationships. As Pope Francis declares, families can experience “the joy of love” (*Amoris Laetitia* 1).

On the other hand, the dysfunctions that exist in many marriages and families can swallow up and thwart some of our human potential. For most people, the family environment in which they grew up is largely responsible for many of the attitudes, strengths, and pitfalls in their adult lives. While we celebrate our family backgrounds as springboards into healthy adulthood, we also mourn all our life-long the wounds that we carry from our family experiences. Most of us experience a combination of the joys and struggles of family formative experiences.



For Christians, one fact remains universal regardless of the diversity of our experiences: Our experience of marriages and family living is our primary path to salvation. Nothing gives us more joy, nothing tests us more relentlessly, and nothing makes us more aware of our need to grow in holiness than marriage and family life. Regardless of how many positives or negatives we can trace back to our upbringings, life within our childhood or current families is where the rubber meets the road; there is no “proving ground” as demanding as the family to test how well we live out the principles of our faith.

In exhorting the Archdiocese of Detroit to “obey the Holy Spirit” in order to “be made by Him a band of joyful missionary disciples,” Archbishop Allen Vigneron cites a specific charge for families in their quest to become missionary disciples: “For families this means that every family embraces its role as the domestic church and, in connection with other families and single persons, actively seeks the spiritual and social renewal of its neighborhood, schools and places of work” (*Unleash the Gospel* 2).

What is the family and what does it mean to be the “domestic church?” What is the current state of the family? How can families serve as greenhouses that nurture and send out confident disciples? How can Pope Francis’ “theology of accompaniment” apply to growing in holiness within families? What cultural factors serve as opportunities or present challenges for families seeking to grow spiritually? All of these aspects of marriage and family life can be fruitful areas for growth.

WHAT DO WE MEAN BY “FAMILY?”

According to Pope St. John Paul, “marriage and the family constitute one of the most precious of human values” (*Familiaris Consortio* 1). This privileged position makes sense when we acknowledge that “the Christian family, in fact, is the first community called to announce the Gospel to the human person

during growth and to bring him or her, through a progressive education and catechesis, to full human and Christian maturity” (FC 2). In this context, the family serves two missions.

First comes evangelization within the family, to the family members themselves. In other words, the family is the primary means of evangelization within itself: “...they are the first and most important setting in which evangelization takes place” (UTG Guidepost 7). This evangelization, or sharing of the truth of Jesus Christ with others, can occur through word and deed between spouses, from parents to children, and among children. Like the intimate fellowship of the Trinity, the family is a communion of persons whose indwelling is marked by abiding love and mutual care among the members. As Pope Francis explains, “The triune God is a communion of love, and the family is its living reflection” (AL 11). In this sense, the family becomes “the domestic church” (FC 21) and a microcosm of the ideal for the entire Church.

Second, the family members who are evangelized eventually and naturally go forth to spread the Gospel beyond the boundaries of their families.

In summary, the family is called to be the domestic church, the primary locus of the evangelization of spouses and children, a communion of persons, and a springboard for sending out disciples who make more disciples. Is this not the very pattern Jesus Himself embodied – spending 30 of His 33 years in the family home at Nazareth and then formally preaching and working miracles? Consider also Jesus’ words that whoever does the will of his Father is his brother, sister, or mother to Him. (cf. Matthew 12:50). If our own family has instilled in us a zeal for the Gospel, we will naturally be on fire to evangelize others.

THE CURRENT STATE OF THE FAMILY

Even though the family is “the fundamental cell



of society,” the family “is experiencing a profound spiritual crisis” (*Evangelii Gaudium* 66). According to Pope Francis, familial bonds have become weakened. Due to rampant individualism in our culture, these bonds have become distorted and often lack “a communion which heals, promotes and reinforces interpersonal bonds” (EG 67). Archbishop Vigneron also notes the current crisis of family life today. Because “we live in a society that devalues human life, rejects the plan of God for marriage, and redefines the family according to human ideas,” the family today faces “unprecedented challenges” (UTG Guidepost 7).

Because of these challenges, Christian families find themselves needing, more than ever before, to live consciously and deliberately as disciples. The old “Catholic culture” of strong Catholic neighborhoods and packed parishes no longer provides the “village” that helped parents raise their children as faithful Catholics. Despite many flaws, the “Catholic culture” of the 1950s, 1960s, and 1970s, played a supportive role and helped sustain Catholic families.

Families need and deserve support, in their role as the primary evangelizers of the family unit and as the source of future evangelizers. Such support is necessary for all families, especially families “affected by divorce, illness or bereavement; infertile couples; those with children with special needs; and those struggling with pornography or other forms of addiction” (UTG, Marker 7.1).

One of the factors that mitigates against families taking on the mantle of intra-family evangelization is hyper-busyness. Many families with preschool, elementary school, and high-school-aged children race from one activity to another most nights of the week. When considered among sports, music lessons, clubs, and other activities, time devoted to faith formation becomes just another “obligation” on the list. At the same time, our parishes have unwittingly catered to this mentality by focusing great resources on the faith formation of children and relatively few resources on the faith formation of their parents. Even casual observation shows that the children of parents who are not focused

on a personal relationship with Jesus Christ and a commitment to living out their faith will likely not continue to practice their faith in adulthood.

In order to encourage the flourishing of faith-centered lives within families, families need a spirituality that aids them in considering all things—soccer, piano, the school play—with the context of faith. Faith needs to become a transformational lens through which all family activity and interaction is seen. This is a tall order for many families, and it must begin with the parents. When children see their parents praying together at home, making weekly worship a priority over everything else, and treating all others with the dignity they deserve, they can begin to realize gradually, as they grow up, that their parents' deepest desire is to move together, as a family, toward eternal salvation.

A GREENHOUSE FOR GROWING IN SACRIFICIAL LOVE

As the saying goes, you can pick your friends, but you cannot pick your family. It is precisely in the fact that the family is a group of people brought together not by choice but by biology that God can work in us, through our family relationships, to bring us closer to Him.

In most families, the members live in a kind of safe zone. Unfortunately, this safe zone can become a place of license for treating each other in un-Christian ways. For example, if I have had a bad day, I might release my frustrations on my husband... I fool myself into thinking I will feel better once I have "taken it out" on him. Why? Because, in my heart, I know he will forgive me. The truth is, quite often we are willing to wound a family member because we know they will ultimately forgive us. Also, we know that we cannot be "kicked out" of the family. My sister will always be my sister, no matter how much she gets on my nerves or how much I annoy her.

For these very reasons, practicing Christian behavior within the family goes a long way to ensuring that all our other relationships will be healthy. If we can, at least most of the time, love our family members in the way Jesus loves, we will probably come close to mastering Christ-like behavior even in the most trying, frustrating situations. Although the mundane nature of most family relationships might make us take them for granted, these very relationships provide the greatest tests of whether we can faithfully live out, not only in word but also in deed, our calling to Christian discipleship within all our relationships.

The challenges of family life are blessed opportunities for growth in sacrificial love. Families enjoy great opportunities to grow in holiness—together. The husband-wife relationship is a classic setting for practicing unconditional love through which couples help one another to stay on the right path and enjoy spiritual growth together. All marriages go through difficult periods, and it is at those times that the test of discipleship becomes real. Will I see to it that unconditional love wins out in my heart, even though such self-less love takes deliberate will power? How many times and how many ways will I have to pour myself out for the other person? Seventy-seven times? To the extent of emptying myself to assume the form of a servant? Washing his or her feet?

This behavior on the part of parents turns their marriage into a powerful model for their children. Having seen their parents' sacrificial love and prioritizing one another's growth in Christ, children receive a blueprint for Christian marriage. No example will ever be perfect; this fact too gives children a reason to hope for their own ability to enter into a future marriage which will prove to be an instrument for their own salvation.

The relationships of parents to their children has the same qualities, except that the parents' role is to guide the children "along right paths" (cf. Psalm 23:3). The parents' teaching and example, in the eyes of the children, is supported by the way in which the husband and wife treat one another. The relationships of siblings, while often more contentious, also provide precious opportunities for children to grow spiritually by practicing patience and care for one another.

The family is like a greenhouse in which plants grow in a nurturing environment. It is an environment which tests us often, but also offers many opportunities for sprouting and blooming. All of this growth, however, requires sacrificial love. Just as Paul calls the Galatians to bear one another's burdens (cf. Galatians 6:2), family members that are well-grounded in the principle of sacrificial love learn to accept the "weeds" of other family members. As positive behavior grows, the entire family flourishes, through the joys and struggles of family life, in growth toward the Lord.

THE ART OF ACCOMPANIMENT WITHIN FAMILIES

Pope Francis has developed a "theology of accompaniment." In *The Joy of the Gospel*, he refers to accompaniment as an art:

In our world, ordained ministers and other pastoral workers can make present the fragrance of Christ's closeness and his personal gaze. The Church will have to initiate everyone – priests, religious and laity – into this "art of accompaniment" which teaches us to remove our sandals before the sacred ground of the other (cf. Ex 3:5) (EG 169).

Francis mentions two elements here which help us to appreciate how he views this art. First, the purpose of accompaniment is to make Christ present to the other. Second, we are to view and relate to the

other person with great reverence. These defining elements serve to distinguish Francis' view from a secular-worldview type of accompaniment, which may portray accompaniment as simply "being there" for others, without any concern for their ultimate good. The prevalence of relativism mitigates against the type of accompaniment Francis calls for; many friends who accompany friends simply maintain a physical or emotional closeness, accepting the friend's decisions without concern for whether those decisions will bring them closer to Christ. As Francis points out, "Some people think they are free if they can avoid God; they fail to see that they remain existentially orphaned, helpless, homeless" (EG 170). To accompany another with patience but also with profound honesty, requires evangelical courage.

In the case of spouses, accompaniment is lifelong, since husbands and wives are called to an enduring commitment of bringing one another closer to Jesus. In keeping with Francis' vision, they are also called to accompany the spouse-- this human being whom God has "assigned" to them as a partner on the road of salvation-- with awe-filled reverence.

In the case of parents toward children, the commitment is equally steadfast but seems to require great patience in many cases. Accompanying teenagers, for example, can be exasperating; it is precisely during these years, however, that children can be in their most intensive "seeker" modes. As children go through different stages of development, openness to the parents' accompaniment rises and falls and rises once more. Again, the aim of bringing children closer to Christ is a bedrock obligation of Christian parents toward their children. In the case of children, it is essential that they know the accompaniment is completely reliable. As Francis explains, "The pace of this accompaniment must be steady and reassuring, reflecting our closeness and our compassionate gaze which also heals, liberates and encourages growth in the Christian life" (EG 169).

Family spirituality is strongly influenced by culture. Depending on their culture, families naturally experience different ways of relating within the family, different value systems, and different traditions.

CULTURAL CHARACTERISTICS OF FAMILIES: OPPORTUNITIES AND CHALLENGES

Family spirituality is strongly influenced by culture. Depending on their culture, families naturally experience different ways of relating within the family, different value systems, and different traditions. Understanding the cultural influences within families is important in helping families grow in a spirituality of evangelization and unconditional love. Some cultural factors that are critical here are individual versus collective cultures, the role and perception of authority, and views of time and activity.

Sociologists tend to characterize cultures as being either “individualistic” or “collective.” Anglo or Euro-American culture tends to be individual-centered. This characteristic, as recent popes have bemoaned, has become more and more prevalent in many Western cultures. Popular portrayals of this cultural tendency would be the “me-first” mentality or the idea of “looking out for number one.” Collectivist cultures, found widely among Hispanics and many Asians, tend to focus more on the group. These two extremes are as clearly delineated as the descriptions might indicate; they describe tendencies among different groups. For example, Anglo families in the United States often send their children off to college or to earn a living at the age of 18. In most collective cultures, separating 18-year-olds from their families would be unusual and viewed as irresponsible on the part of the family. Another example would be decision-making processes. In individualistic cultures, people

tend to make decisions on their own, with little consultation within the family or other groups. In collectivist cultures, decisions are made by taking into consideration wide input from the family or other groups.

A spirituality founded upon the prospect of being “saved together,” where family members act as responsible for one another’s growth in holiness, is more likely to be adopted naturally in collectivist cultures. The concept of the group as a unit that acts together and is made up of people who look out for one another is already in place. For families within individualistic cultures, the spiritual responsibility of the members of the group for one another requires much more attention and nurturing.

Different cultures tend to view authority differently. Collectivist cultures tend to have greater respect for authority figures, such as those in church positions or the elders within families. Members of individualistic cultures tend to be more reluctant to accept authority; questioning authority is more common. Families that accept authority readily may find a “greenhouse” that is more docile to parents’ guidance in faith development. In families where authority is questioned, there is a need to build trust through diligent accompaniment. Accompaniment is proof of true caring; true caring helps to break down anti-authority-figure barriers.

The use and perceptions of time and activity is another cultural factor that can be important in the spirituality of the family. Certain cultures tend to view time as more flexible; there is less tendency to rush or to “make every minute count.” In many Western cultures, time is a commodity. This attitude



is reflected in the saying, "Time is money." If time is money, productive activity is at a premium. By contrast, cultures which have a less structured attitude toward time tend to be more relaxed... these families might be perceived, by Western families, as being too "laid back." It would be important to reach a middle ground in this area, striking a balance between the "time-is-a-commodity" mentality and the laid-back mentality. Awareness of how to manage attitudes toward time and activity is important in helping families live out their Christian lives. Those who are more rigid about time may need more encouragement to spend relaxing time together. On the other hand, families who are more relaxed about time may need to adopt a more structured approach to prayer time, for example.

There are additional cultural perspectives we should also consider in looking at families. For example, are there certain characteristics that seem to be common in single-parent families? Are there certain traits that are prevalent in families which include a special-needs child? What about families in which a family member suffers from an addiction? In helping families to become the domestic church and to eventually go out to evangelize the nations, we will not be successful without considering each family in terms of their present concrete reality. Some families may need specific services before they can even consider seeking to become intentional domestic churches.

CONCLUSION

Marriage and family "correspond to the deepest needs and dignity" of the human person (cf. *Caritatis in Veritate* 44). Even though the family as an institution is experiencing crisis today, the family—mother, father, and children—is God's perfect plan for relationships in which we can seek to be saved together. When husband and wife accept that they are entering into a true communion of persons patterned after the design of God, they start down a path that leads them into deeper relationship with one another and with God. Deviations will occur, but the commitment to the ultimate goal will keep families on track.

We all need to be aware and respond to situations in which we are called to reverently accompany others, always remembering that the objective of this accompaniment is to bring others closer to Christ. Culture is an important consideration in any pastoral work with families, since cultural characteristics condition how families see all the aspects of their lives together.

If we believe that, for the majority of us, our marriages and our families are our primary road to salvation, we will encounter deep joy in our quest to grow in holiness specifically through our roles as wives, husbands, mothers, fathers, brothers, and sisters. Seeking to be saved together is the greatest journey of our lives.

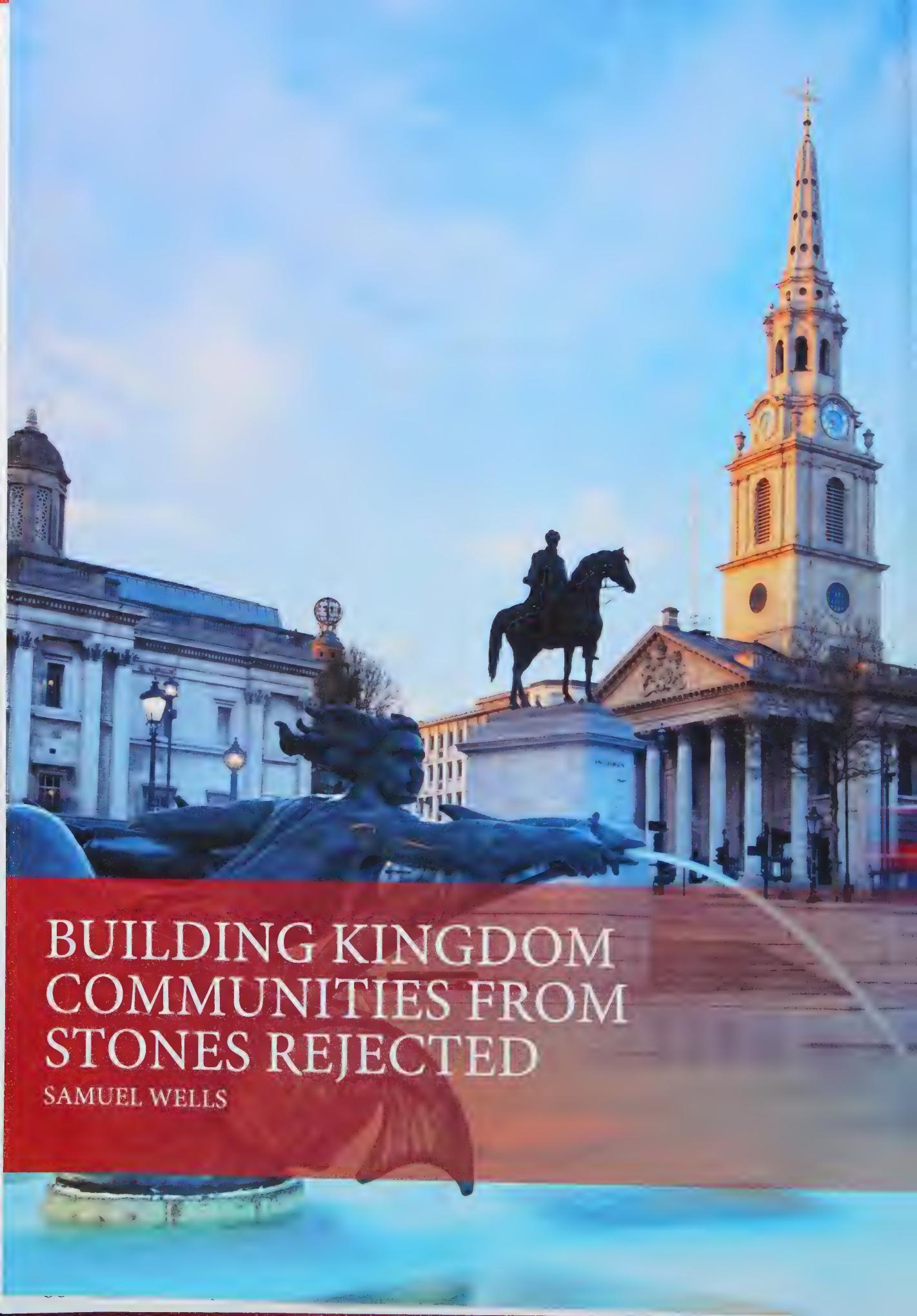
QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION

1. Janet Diaz speaks about families evangelizing themselves and then going out to evangelize others. The first step is essential: evangelizing within the family: spending quality time together, having honest conversations and praying together. According to my particular life circumstances, how could I help my own family of origin (or my community) to be a setting of evangelization?
2. She applies Pope Francis' "theology of accompaniment" to family spirituality – not just "being there" for or with the other family member(s) but sharing experiences in an honest and reverential manner. Who taught me genuine accompaniment? Who do I "accompany" at this time? Do I believe the Lord is accompanying me in and through a variety of people in my life at this time? Do I express my gratitude to them and remember to thank God for them in my prayer?
3. The author also notes that some "cultures" within our larger social reality are more individualistic while others are more communal. What is the current cultural situation in which you live or minister? How does your "cultural" setting support and/or challenge a spirituality of being "saved together?"



ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Janet Diaz, D.Min. is the Director of Evangelization at Church of the Holy Family in Novi, Michigan. Prior to her current position she served as Dean of the Institute for Ministry at Sacred Heart Major Seminary and ministered in various roles, working extensively with Hispanics.



A composite image featuring a classical building facade with a pedimented portico, a statue of a man on a horse (equestrian statue) in the foreground, and a church tower with a spire and clock face in the background, all set against a dusk or dawn sky.

BUILDING KINGDOM COMMUNITIES FROM STONES REJECTED

SAMUEL WELLS



God of time and eternity, if I love thee for hope of heaven, then deny me heaven; if I love thee for fear of hell, then give me hell; but if I love thee for thyself alone, then give me thyself alone. Amen.

FROM ESCAPE TO EMBODIMENT

‘I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly.’ (John 10.10) Christians do not have to look far for a mission statement for the Church: living abundant life. That is what the Father intends, the Son embodies and the Spirit facilitates. Christians are called to live in such a way that gratefully receives the abundance God is giving them, evidences the transformation from scarcity to abundance to which God is calling them, dwells with God in that abundant life, and shares that abundance far and wide. Jesus is our model of abundant life; his life, death and resurrection chart the transformation from the scarcity of sin and death to the abundance of healing and resurrection; he longs to bring all humankind into a reconciled and flourishing relationship with God, one another, themselves and all creation. Discipleship is the means for inhabiting that abundant life.

Ministry involves building up the Church to embody that abundant life. Mission names the ways that abundant life is practiced, shared and discovered in the world at large.

So far so good. Nothing not to like. So, as doctors say, what seems to be the problem? Well, round about 1860 something important began to change. People started to stop believing in hell. It was on both philosophical and moral grounds. They 'did the math' and worked out that while ten million years of roasting in hell seemed in order for the most unspeakable sinners, ten million is less than a drop in the ocean compared to eternity. Meanwhile the agonies and horrors of hell seem hard to reconcile with the grace and mercy of God. It takes a while to comprehend just how much of a revolution in the Christian faith arose from people starting to stop believing in hell. There are two closely related dimensions.

First, the central purpose of Church needs a rethink. It can no longer be principally a mechanism for delivering people from the perils of damnation to the joys of the Elysian Fields. Hence the choice of words of the prayer above. God is no longer an instrument for conveying us upstairs rather than downstairs. God is not fundamentally a means to the end of securing our eternal survival and bliss. God is the end or purpose of all existence: 'If I love thee for thyself alone, then give me thyself alone.' The central purpose of the Church is not so much drawing people to God so their eternal salvation will no longer be in jeopardy; it is rather to invite people to enjoy God just as God enjoys them. God embraces them for their own sake, not for some ulterior purpose: they should embrace God likewise.

Second, the attitude of Church toward world needs to change. From the evading-hell perspective, the world is characterized by the flesh and pervaded by the devil, so worldly existence is largely to be spent escaping the earthly realities around us and encouraging others to do so. The Church offers sanctuary, heavenly medicine, protection and training for avoiding earthly snares and temptations. But a different view of God leads to an alternative understanding of the world. No longer is life about dodging the flesh of this world in order to merit the spirit of the next. Now the world has a validity of its own. All has not been lost in the Fall. The Holy Spirit is doing surprising, exuberant, and plentiful things in the world. The Church is called not simply to guide people's escape from the world, but to celebrate creation, enjoy culture, and share in flourishing life.

There are four main problems with the evading-hell model of Church. First, it diminishes God by seeing the Trinity not as an end to be glorified in itself but as a means to rescue us from torment or oblivion. Second, it impoverishes the world by seeing it as a prison to be escaped rather than a theatre, playground and garden to be enjoyed. Third, it misrepresents the Church by understating its shortcomings while overstating the deficiencies of the world. Fourth, it depletes the Church by depriving it of and blinding it to the abundant gifts God wishes to give it through the world.

I am not suggesting that the life, death and resurrection of Jesus, in the context of Israel and the early Church, in other words the witness of Scripture, is not central in the life of the Church. It is central because it shows us the heart of God, and the paradigm of abundant life. We would

We would not know “abundant life” had God not shown it to us in Jesus.

not know “abundant life” had God not shown it to us in Jesus. But our attention to the specific, definitive embodiment of full divinity and full humanity in Jesus should not inhibit our seeing the manifestations of Christ’s presence brought about by the Holy Spirit in the world around us. Quite the opposite: learning to discern Christ in the Scriptures should make us all the more adept at perceiving His presence in everyone and everywhere. The evading-hell approach tends to concentrate on how to convey to the maximum number of people the specific benefits secured by Christ’s passion, so as to ensure those people seek those benefits and are accordingly delivered unto heaven. By contrast the abundant-life approach seeks to shape communities whose habits and practices anticipate and portray the life of heaven. The focus is not so much on the Holy Spirit making present what Christ did long ago; it is also about paying attention to and being transformed by the ways Christ is being made known today.

Our doctrine has changed – or, better yet, developed. Unfortunately the structures of our Church have lagged behind. For the most part our churches are still set up according to the evading-hell model. We still take people out of the world for an intense hour or two a week to be transported to heaven and thus to be restored or fueled or inspired to face the challenges of their lives. We tend to define spirituality in tension with materiality. True devotion is seen as a retreat from the world. We have a banking model of mission, that assumes we need to stock up on Scriptural and theological knowledge and then communicate as much of that knowledge as we can.

I want to describe a different mindset– a mindset that reflects abundant life or what we might call a “kingdom mindset.” I will present three points: the convictions of kingdom communities, the constraints on kingdom communities, and the characteristics of kingdom communities.



THE CONVICTIONS OF KINGDOM COMMUNITIES

Kingdom communities believe that Jesus’ life offers us a template to talk about our lives, about the Church and about the world – or, to use theological words for the same, discipleship, ministry and mission. I want to speak about how four key convictions of kingdom communities arise out of the template of Jesus’ life: Christmas, Good Friday, Easter and Pentecost.

Christmas proclaims that every good thing of God and creation can be embodied in just one single life. God is infinite spirit, but, at Christmas we rejoice that the whole wonder of God has been communicated in one mortal, finite, material body.



The Incarnation of Christ makes clear that human flesh can convey ultimate truth; it can express not just fallibility and limitation but glory and grace. One of Christ's parables speaks of one slave that buried his talent in the hillside and two that took theirs to market to face the risk of encounter. God is that slave who took the talent of creative love to the hurly-burly of creation rather than bury it in the safe hillside of sequestered eternity. We look on our human form and see its weakness and its folly; the Holy Spirit looks on our human form and makes it capable of opening a window onto heaven and a vision into the heart of God. Sin is not "living it up;" on the contrary, sin is failing to live to the full, refraining from embracing life in all its extent, focusing one's desires and energies on something less than, and unworthy of, the kingdom. Christmas tells us we meet God not by withdrawing from life, but by immersing ourselves in it.

We lament the scarcity of God, assuming God should be everywhere and always; but Christmas shows us the abundance of God, the fullness of whom was pleased to dwell there and then. Through Christmas we learn not to search for mammon, the things that run out – comparison and competition, and their children, envy and greed – but to love the things that God gives in plenty, that never run short – love, joy, peace. God is plenty. Joy is to find and be overwhelmed by the abundance of God. Sin is the fear that we will not have enough and the vain search to find security elsewhere.

Good Friday proclaims that there is no limit to what God will do to be with us – indeed, that to be with us forever Jesus will not only yield up his life but will even temporarily jeopardize His being with the Father. But Good Friday embodies a paradox: that at humanity's lowest moment, at God's most horrifying moment, humanity is the closest it could ever be to God. This is the image that epitomizes the Christian faith: the naked, exposed, forsaken Jesus, the unmistakeable manifestation of our inseparability from God. In this is love, not that God conquers, not that we excel, but that when we disclose our very worst, God does not let us go. This expresses a strand of Biblical faith that goes back to Judah's exile in Babylon. Deprived of land, king and temple, Judah yet discovers that it is closer to God than ever it was in the Promised Land. If I love thee for hope of heaven, then deny me heaven; if I love thee for fear of hell, then give me hell; but if I love thee for thyself alone, then give me thyself alone. Judah had previously loved God for the hope of heaven or the fear of hell: now Judah says, 'Give me yourself alone' – and God replies, 'Here is myself alone.'

And the conviction that this reveals is that there is a window into the heart of God that can be seen by those who experience adversity. That window, however, is invisible to the comfortable. This insight transforms "mission." Mission is no longer the wise trying to make the foolish less foolish or the comfortable trying to make the distressed more comfortable. Now mission is discipleship, because it is people recognizing that, if they are not being

themselves oppressed, the chances are they are unconsciously implicated in or at least beneficiaries of the process of oppressing, and they must choose whose side to be on. And it is ministry, because the Church is recognizing that if it is to see God truly they must be alongside those closest to Him, that is, the “poor” (in every sense of the word). Note that this disposition is far more complex than simply being “inclusive”; that perspective implicitly suggests those in circumstances of power or control choose to “let in” people who are apparently “less worthy.” The “centre” gives kindly hospitality to the “periphery,” so the periphery feels humiliated and the centre feels smug. The comfortable need the oppressed more than the oppressed need the comfortable!

Easter offers a definition and redefinition of past and future. Human existence is experienced as a prison because of our panic about the past and our fear of the future. We do not live in the present tense because our lives are dominated by bitterness, grief and humiliation about the past, and paralyzed by anxiety and terror and horror about the future. Easter proclaims two central convictions: One about sin, and one about death; one about the past, and one about the future. The first conviction is about the past. It is the forgiveness of sins. Forgiveness does not change the past but it releases us from the power of the past. Forgiveness does not rewrite history, but it prevents our histories from asphyxiating us. Forgiveness transforms our past from an enemy to a friend, from a horror-show of shame to a storehouse of wisdom. In the absence of forgiveness we are isolated from our past, pitifully trying to bury, deny, forget or destroy the many things that haunt and overshadow and torment us. Forgiveness does not change these things: but it does change their relationship to us. No longer do they imprison, surround us or stalk us. Now they accompany us, deepen us, teach us, train us. Now we find acceptance, understanding, enrichment, even gratitude for them. That is the work of forgiveness, the transformation of the prison of the past.

The second Easter conviction is about the future: life everlasting. Everlasting life does not resolve the unknown element of the future, but it takes away the fear that can engulf us. Everlasting life does not dismantle the reality of death, the crucible of suffering or the agony of bereavement, but it offers life beyond death, comfort beyond suffering, companionship beyond separation. In the absence of everlasting life we are terrified of our future, perpetually trying to secure permanence in the face of transitoriness, meaning in the face of waste, distraction in the face of despair. Everlasting life does not undermine human endeavor, but it rids it of the last word; evil is real, but it will not have the last say; death is coming, but it does not obliterate the power of God. Easter says there is forgiveness – so the past is a gift; and there is everlasting life – the future is our friend. That is what freedom means. We can truly exist. That is the gospel.

Pentecost proclaims that the work of reconciliation was not only the work of Jesus, incarnate among us, but it continues to be the central work of the Church in ministry and mission. The Church has no deeper work than reconciliation, between people and God, creation, one another and themselves. Every calling of ministry and mission is but an element of reconciliation, which involves telling a truthful story, proceeds through apology, penance and repentance, and issues in forgiveness, reconciliation, healing and resurrection. Justice, truth and mercy: find their meaning as steps on the way to reconciliation.

Baptism is the embodiment of reconciliation with God; the Eucharist is a paradigm of how reconciliation with God creates and makes possible a reconciled community. The terms we use for reconciliation, vividly remind us of the complexity of the process: changed hearts, healed minds, energized bodies, renewed spirits. The Holy Spirit is the action of God that makes present today the reconciliation Jesus enacted once and for all. Sometimes it happens through the ministry of the Church; sometimes it is in the world in spite of the Church.

Christmas, Good Friday, Easter and Pentecost name the four key convictions of kingdom communities. We could also call them abundance, grace, freedom and reconciliation.

THE CONSTRAINTS ON KINGDOM COMMUNITIES

I went to see a woman of advanced years. She had grown up in Wales and had left the Church as a young woman. She flew the nest. But now that she is over 90, she is giving the Church a second chance. I took a slight risk. 'D'you mind me asking what it was that led you to be away from the Church for 75 years?' But I forgot a basic rule: never ask a question to which you might get an answer you are not ready to hear.

'It was when we wanted to get married. We were in love. The minister would not marry us.' Well, this sounds romantic, I thought, and, always a soft touch for romance, I blundered in where angels fear to tread. 'So was there something wrong? Was your husband previously married, or were you too young, maybe?' 'No,' she said calmly, trying hard not to be patronizing or angry. 'The minister looked at my hand. You see, I worked in a mill. I had an accident when I was 16.' She gently, undemonstratively, held up her left hand. The last three fingers were missing. 'The minister said that, since I didn't have a finger to put the wedding ring on, he could not marry us.'

The colour drained from my face, and I reacted with the disbelieving half-laugh one coughs out when one hears something so ridiculous that it just has to be funny, but in fact is not funny at all but deeply, deeply horrifying. It was so absurd that no one could make it up. It had to be true. Quickly I felt that 75

years away from the Church was pretty lenient. 'And dare I ask what brings you back to the Church now?' 'God is bigger than the Church,' she replied. 'I'll be dead soon. The Lord's Prayer says forgive if you want to be forgiven. So in the end that's what I have decided to do.'

I tell this story because I believe it illustrates what is preventing us from being kingdom communities. The Church has made God's love too narrow with false strictures of its own. It has at times imposed class, gender, race and other thresholds that contradict the shape of God's kingdom. It has even regarded the gospel and salvation as its own possession to dispense or withhold. It has often failed to distinguish between seekers, the lapsed, those of no professed faith and those of other faiths and judged them all as one.

Quite often, however, the lapsed are astray because of the Church's shortcomings. That Welsh millworker hints at a story in which the lapsed are those who await the opportunity to save the Church. After 75 years, she gives the Church another chance. The question is, whether the Church is ready to seize that chance a second time around. It's a question that might make us shudder to answer.

The point is that churches are often quick to attribute their plight to a hostile culture or an indifferent, distracted population or even a sinful generation; and much slower to recognize that their situation is significantly of their own making. I was blessed that Welsh millworker even considered it worth her time to talk with me. The problem is not simply occasional thoughtlessness; it is a mind-set that makes the Church a refuge of the worthy, the advantaged, and the self-assured.

But I forgot a basic rule: never ask a question to which you might get an answer you are not ready to hear.

THE CHARACTERISTICS OF KINGDOM COMMUNITIES

One Palm Sunday in my own congregation a passion narrative was performed during the morning service. The part of Jesus was played by a young man from Afghanistan. The disciples were a rag-tag bunch. One was a congregation member with a subcontinent background, another a homeless UK national who often attends weekday morning prayer. Judas was a Malaysian congregation member. The other nine were members of the weekly 45-strong asylum-seekers group that meets every Sunday afternoon – including a Kurdish Iranian, a Ugandan, a Jamaican and a South African. One was a Ghanaian who had spent two years traveling to the UK, crossing the Mediterranean from North Africa in a boat and waiting for many weeks in the Calais Jungle. The members of the Sanhedrin were dressed like the FBI – the epitome of white machismo. Instead of whipping the Afghan Christ, they waterboarded him. A tall, well-built, confident middle-aged New Yorker played Pilate. When he said ‘What is truth?’ we in the congregation shivered. When he said ‘The people have spoken,’ we shivered again. We were half waiting for him to say ‘Crucifixion means crucifixion.’ When Jesus was taken down from the cross and laid on the altar, the Ghanaian who played the Beloved Disciple handled the dead body with such care it was clear he had done such things many times before.

Many of the British public see such people as a threat or, at best, an administrative burden. Churches tend to see them as objects of pity and mercy. On Palm Sunday they were none of these; they were prophets, preachers and provocative witnesses to the gospel. They challenged our congregation to question themselves as to where each of them stood in the passion story. This was the first time they had led us into worship. In the past, members of our asylum-seeker group had joined our fellowship by acting as wicket-keeper or demon opening bowler in our cricket team, or as waiter for our hospitality events. But on Palm Sunday they were swept up into the

passion narrative itself. And they changed the whole way we thought about the story we thought we knew.

If you are looking for a cornerstone, the best place to look is among the stones that the builders have rejected. Over the last few years I have attended a number of events around dementia, disability, and faith. At one such evening the room was electrified when a person with dementia spoke with wisdom, courage, and truth. Two friends had sat with her for several hours and recorded her insights and reflections. They then typed up those remarks and she was more than capable of reading them to the captivated gathering. Those with dementia must be among the most rejected in our society, but that night it was brilliantly obvious that the Holy Spirit was speaking through her. One disability event began with a person with autism describing in unforgettable detail what it would have felt like for a person like himself to be present in the crowd at the first Palm Sunday, and how the sensory overload would have overwhelmed him. No one listening could ever see all the hosannas and palm branches in such an innocent way again.

Some time ago I attended an event for single people, in which participants explored the advantages and disappointments, sadness and opportunity of being voluntarily or involuntarily single. Again it was a discovery of solidarity, wisdom, and hope. On another occasion there was an event for those fleeing oppressive societies on account of their sexual identity. These were stones the builders had rejected if you ever saw them: but coming together in the company of others who had been rejected in different ways they could find inspiration and purpose beyond fear and escape. One of the particular ministries my own church has developed is in what you might call acute pastoral services. We have gatherings for those affected by suicide, to support families of the missing, to remember victims of homicide, to commemorate those who have died homeless. All these occasions proclaim that wisdom and faith are found in the places of exile and rejection. Kingdom communities are founded on stones once rejected.

The stone that the builders rejected did not find a place by being thoughtfully included like a last-minute addition to a family photo. The rejected stone became the *cornerstone*, the keystone – the stone that held up all the others, the crucial link, the vital connection. The rejected stone is Jesus. In his crucifixion he was rejected by the builders – yet in his resurrection he became the cornerstone of forgiveness and eternal life. That is true ministry and mission – not just welcoming alienated strangers, *but seeking out the rejected precisely because they are the energy and the life-force that will transform us all.* Every minister, every missionary, every evangelist, every disciple should have these words over their desk, their windscreen, on their screensaver, in the photo section of their wallet, wherever they see it all the time – the stone the builders rejected has become the cornerstone. *If you are looking for the future Church, look at what the Church and society has so blithely rejected.* The Church is dynamic to the extent we recognise all we have rejected, and celebrate that God gives us back what we once rejected to become the cornerstone of our lives.

You may have come across Antonio Vivaldi. My congregation is pretty indebted to Vivaldi, because his Four Seasons is our biggest money-spinner. It is performed around 20 times a year and visitors love it. But it turns out there's more to Vivaldi than the rites of spring. He lived from 1678-1741 and spent most of his life in Venice.

But this is where it gets interesting. How did Vivaldi earn a living? When he wrote his Magnificat he was working as choir master at an institution known as the Pietà. This was a charitable home for foundlings. Now, one may say an orphanage was pretty lucky to acquire the services of one of the greatest composers of the Western European musical tradition. But look more closely. How did the orphanage fund its work? It had a fascinating and brilliant business model. It trained its orphans to sing for their supper. Vivaldi's job was to compose pieces of music and train his

choir of young orphans to sing them, so as to attract to chapel services a wealthy congregation who would, through their donations and bequests, support and finance the institution. And there is another dimension: Catholic Europe did not countenance mixed church choirs in the early eighteenth century. The boys would leave the orphanage and enter apprenticeships. It was left to the girls to make up the choir. If you look at the score of the Magnificat, you'll see that the vocal bass parts are pitched high enough that they can be sung by the all-female choir of the Pietà.

Notice the ways this “business model” of Pietà operated. It did not depend on pity; it did not begin with scarcity. It started with people's talents and promise, not their neediness and suffering. It did assume the people with the money have the answers while the people without money had only problems and tragedy. It embodied a philosophy of abundance. But neither was it naïve: the children were not the finished article – they need training, like anyone else; but in becoming a choir, the children learned the skills for human growth: partnership, discipline, teamwork, training – and, yes, business sense and entrepreneurial imagination.

Antonio Vivaldi embodied the characteristics of kingdom communities. He saw the orphans, not as burdens or objects of duty or pity, but as prophets of the kingdom. He built a cultural, charitable and commercial project out of conditions of exile, abandonment and adversity. Everyone knows he was a composer. Some people also know he was a violinist. Hardly anyone remembers he was a priest. He was not just making a sustainable charitable institution, worthy as that was. He was renewing the Church; he was embodying the kingdom.

May God bless you as you discern the stones that the builders rejected, and discover in them the gifts God is giving you to enter abundant life.

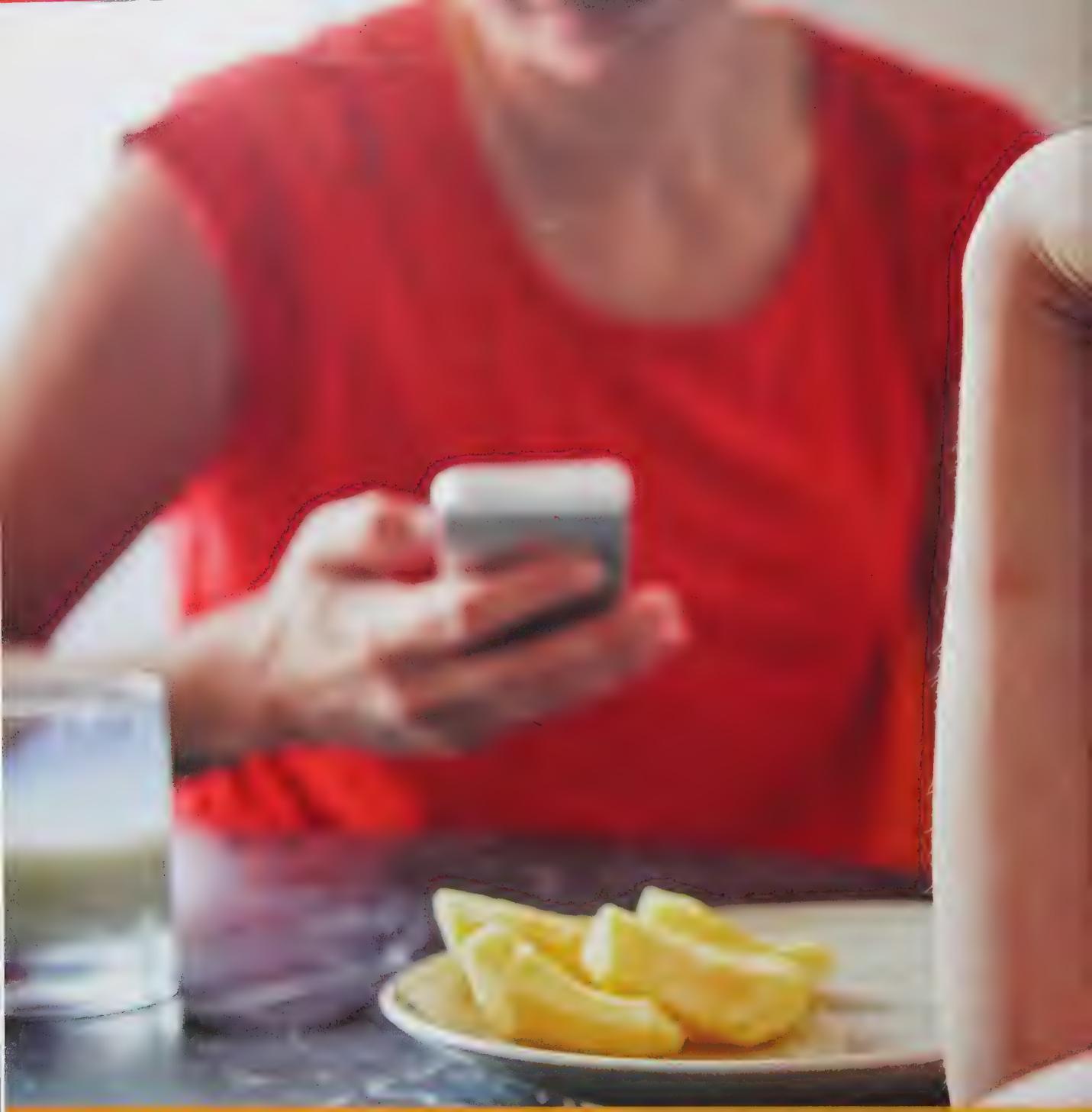
QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION

1. Father Wells suggests that our approach to mission and ministry should abandon the language and mind-set of avoiding hell but rather “inviting people to enjoy God just as God enjoys them.”
2. Do I personally work from a fear/duty perspective of spirituality or from a sense of joy and abundance? What about my parishioners? How might we move away from a model of simply “evading hell?”
3. In his essay, Father Wells focuses on four major feasts of the Church year and how each one teaches us a critical insight:
 - Christmas proclaims the abundant goodness of all human life.
 - Good Friday reminds us we are closest to God when we are with Christ still now crucified – that is, among the vulnerable.
 - Easter removes our shame for past sins by Christ’s forgiveness and assures us the future is not to be a source of fear.
 - Pentecost proclaims reconciliation.How might his insights change the way you will celebrate these feasts in the months ahead?
4. Father Wells reminds us that we can build vibrant communities of faith precisely by our attention to “stones rejected.” What aspects of myself have I rejected as “unworthy” of God? Might I be able to let that “Achilles’ heel” become a “building block,” even a “cornerstone” for a new relationship with the Lord and others? Are there particular people or groups of people our community has “written off” as “unworthy” or hopeless? Is there a way we could let them become “building blocks” even “cornerstones” of some aspect of our Church life?



ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Rev. Dr. Sam Wells is a preacher, pastor, writer, broadcaster, and theologian. He has served as a Church of England parish priest for 19 years. He also spent 7 years in North Carolina, where he was Dean of Duke University Chapel. Sam is Visiting Professor of Christian Ethics at King's College London. He has published 27 books. His most recent book is 'Hanging by a Thread'. He has been Vicar of St. Martin-in-the-Fields since 2012.



ME AND MY DEPRESSION

STROLLING DOWN LIFE'S AVENUE

Geri Kline, OP



INTRODUCTION

Depression, one form of mental illness, is now affecting more people than ever before in history. It touches the lives of young and old, poor and rich, educated and uneducated, families, businesses, and communities. The symptoms of depression are exacerbated in our society by the disconnection resulting, ironically, from the technological advances which are intended to connect us: email, tweets, voicemails, instagrams, tags, posts, etc. It is impossible to nurture close personal connections when we do not talk to each other, share ideas, or even look at each other. Frequently we see entire families in a restaurant totally engrossed in their devices: each, from youngest to oldest, engaged in video games, posts, tags, cartoons, or music coming through headphones. There is much written about the information overload that impinges on our personal space, sense of peace, and depth of thought. It is, however, our growing disconnection that leads directly to feelings of aloneness and isolation, both likely contributors to depression.



Depression is distinct from the common feelings of sadness, grief, dejection, unhappiness, etc.

Depression is a mental illness which has carried a stigma no longer defensible given today's scientific knowledge. The brain is an organ just like the heart, kidneys or liver. Despite extensive scientific and medical studies, diseases of these organs are better recognized, understood, and treated than diseases of the brain. Simply put, depression is an imbalance of neurotransmitters, chemicals in the brain affected by biological, hormonal, genetic, and/or stress factors. One may not be able to trace her or his depression to any specific recognizable cause. It may be mild or severe, sporadic or chronic. Depression is not a character weakness, a moral failing, or a reason for shame. Clinical depression, if not treated, can have serious consequences, prime among them suicide.

Why am I writing this article? Some advised me against telling my story because they said I would be labeled and judged. Others strongly encouraged me to tell my story, a story all too common yet often shrouded in secrecy and shame. As I weighed the options, I decided in favor of transparency. To be

transparent is to make oneself vulnerable. Will those who read this think less of me? Will the shame attached to mental illness color people's perception of me so that from now on they see me with a mentally ill label on my forehead?

I believe it's worth being vulnerable if telling my story helps even one person with depression or contributes to one person's change of attitude toward mental illness and toward people suffering from mental illness. We are, after all, persons with a disease, not unlike persons with diabetes, leukemia, cancer, leprosy, etc. The disease does not define the person.

First, I want to make it clear that I have had a very good life, with friendships, challenges, accomplishments, and the respect of many people. My life thread is one whole but I have divided it into parts to give a clearer picture of the fact and consequences of depression in my life. Each person's experience of any illness is unique to that person. What follows is my story.

MY STORY: PART I

If you are familiar with Lewis Carroll's "Adventures of Alice in Wonderland," you may remember that Alice followed the white rabbit down the rabbit hole. It was like a tunnel for part of the way and then suddenly dipped and Alice found herself falling down what seemed to be a very deep hole. She fell into a world that made no sense at all. Alice and I share something in common. At several points in my life, I, too, fell into a hole that made no sense at all.

A bit of background: I am from a large family and my parents worked hard to provide each of us with an excellent education. We are a close family and I remember my childhood years as happy: playing with neighbors; taking family outings to relative's homes, lakes and parks; fishing and going to baseball games with my dad; learning to knit and crochet with my mom, etc. In one of my high school classes, we studied The Four Temperaments. At that time, I assessed myself as Sanguine-Melancholic; finding life joyful and challenging while at times experiencing periods of sadness. This seemed normal to me and I appreciated the balance of joy and seriousness in my personality – better, I thought in my youth, than being Choleric or Phlegmatic! The sanguine part of me was predominant and I now believe, with no discernible proof, that the melancholic side of my personality put me at higher risk for bouts of depression.

My college years, entrance into the congregation, and various ministries – as a high school teacher and principal, position in province leadership and formation ministry, ten years of ministry in Bolivia, nine units of clinical pastoral counseling, and thirteen years as a certified professional counselor, in addition to all the study to prepare for these ministries - were happy and meaningful experiences. Dark clouds of sadness occasionally loomed but in these cases I could weather the bumps and recover my energy and joy in life.

THEN THE SHOE DROPPED!

Looking back and now aware that my family history did include depression, I am not completely surprised that depression became a significant factor in my life over 30 years ago while I was ministering in Bolivia. At first, I did not pay much attention to my changing emotions: less interest in things, loss of appetite, inability to feel happy, inability to cope with high stress in my ministry, restlessness, and feelings of being emotionally frozen. There came a point, however, when I knew I could not continue life as it was for me. Serious depression is extremely debilitating. With the strong support of my community and congregational leadership, I left my ministry, returned to the States, and entered a residential treatment program. The program included psychotherapy, counseling, classes in communication, relationships, sexuality, cosmology, theologies of women, relaxation, and how to live a more balanced life. My depression lifted and I looked forward to returning to community and ministry.

I did not return to Bolivia and, following clinical pastoral training, became certified as a professional counselor. I learned that depression does not need a specific cause though it can be aggravated by stressful experiences. I mistakenly believed this first serious bout of depression was like an inoculation for me. During the ensuing years when I felt depression lurking around the corner - and I did suffer brief periods of depression from time to time - I immediately sought counseling and medication. In fact, at one point, with the approval of a psychiatrist, I decided to stay on what I called a maintenance prescription of anti-depressant medication, thinking I was now safe from falling into that dark hole I had stumbled into and all the helpless, hopeless feelings that had permeated my life. I was inoculated and safe! Happy ending to the story? Not quite.

MY STORY: PART II THE OTHER SHOE DROPPED!

In the fall of 2013, almost 20 years after returning from Bolivia, I felt myself again falling into depression despite my precaution of staying on anti-depressant medication. My emotional journey into a very dark and confusing place was gradual, not sudden like Alice's. I mentioned to my community members that I could feel depression returning. Despite counseling, increased medication, changes in medication, and exploring alternative therapies, within a month I found myself in an even darker, deeper, and more frightening hole than before.

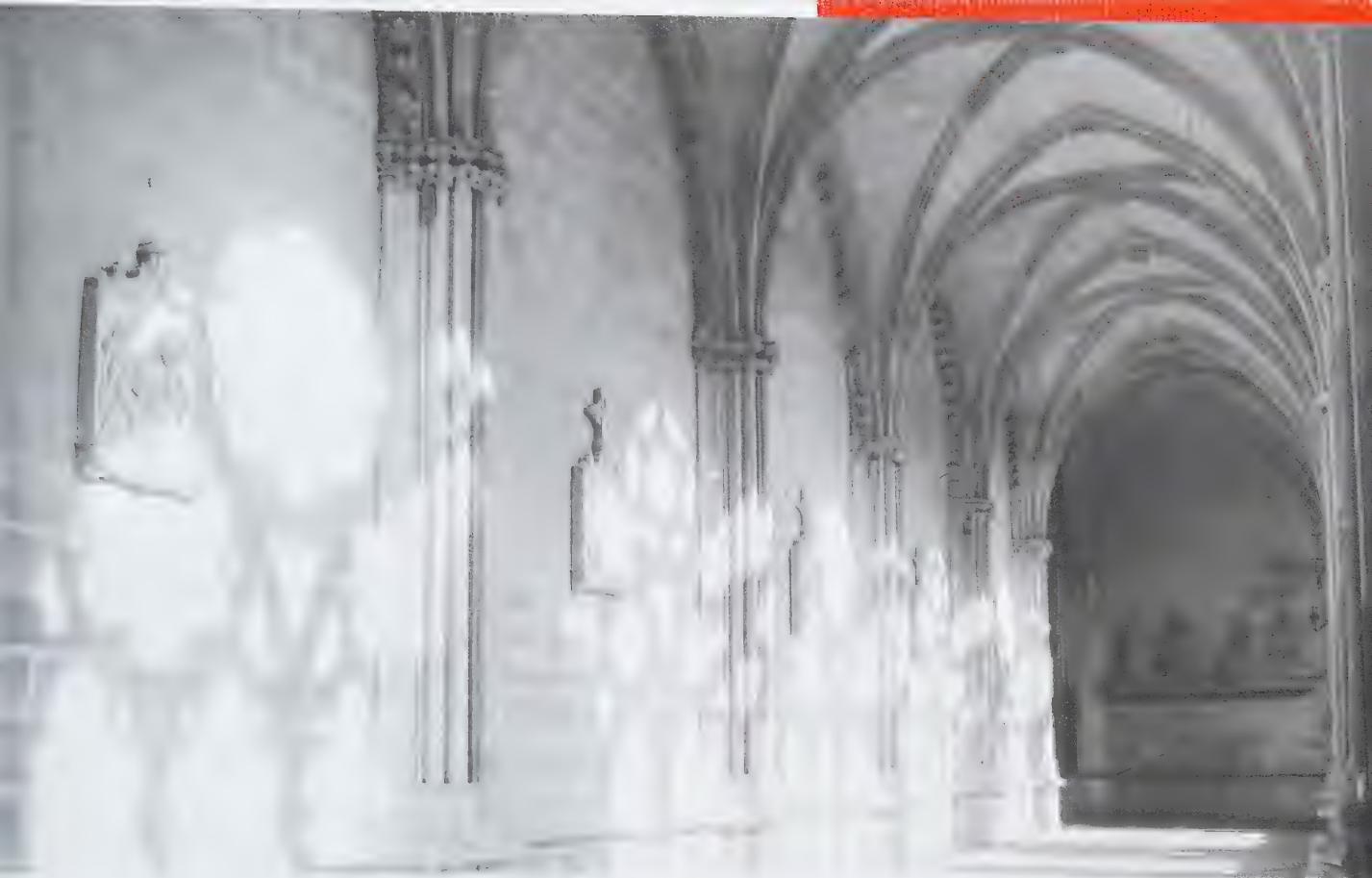
My depression was so severe that once again I had to quit my ministry. I could not pray, stopped going to Mass, avoided seeing friends, lost any sense of God's presence in my life, literally had nothing to say to anyone and felt a total disconnect with life. I saw several counselors and psychiatrists who put me on various antidepressants. Nothing changed. I felt even worse. With my doctor's advice, I admitted myself to a hospital where I was again given a variety of medications. After two weeks with no improvement and finding the environment contributing to my depression, I left the hospital and returned to my community. For seven months, I sought in vain for help, and my spirit became more hopeless and helpless with each passing day. The sisters in my community were concerned and supported me in whatever way they could but nothing helped. I sought relief in many forms but the hole was too deep. I knew people cared about me and, although I tried, I couldn't reach any of the hands held out to me. Life was unbearable. I was existing, not living. I

was desperate. Thoughts of suicide plagued me daily. As a last resort, conferring with my council contact and our director of health and wellness, I began a six-month residential treatment program on May 23, 2014. As the days and weeks progressed, I was bombarded with negative thoughts: "Geri, you're a failure, you don't measure up, you will never get well" and on and on! I felt that God had abandoned me, I did not like myself and I could not relate to those around me. The thoughts of suicide continued because the pain of existing in isolation and disconnection was too great, too intense, too hopeless. I knew this was not me, not the Geri I had known, the Geri who had lived so many wonderful and enriching experiences ...but depression does not care about the past or future. It is completely focused inward on feelings of pain, shame, disconnection, and isolation.

The residential treatment program included a wide range of supportive elements: individual and group therapy and spiritual formation, skills for community life, psycho-educational groups, art therapy, a host of 12-step programs, fitness classes, and opportunities for daily liturgies and prayer. I do not know how I did it – maybe my German stubbornness – but I participated fully in each program, though without emotion and real interest. I knew I was getting valuable information and was surrounded by supportive people, but the depression and accompanying anxiety had a firm grip on me and would not let go.

I was like the paralytic in Luke's Gospel. Unable to help myself, I had to put my trust in the faith of others who told me, "You will get through this." At

I was like the paralytic in Luke's Gospel. Unable to help myself, I had to put my trust in the faith of others who told me, "You will get through this."



the time, I had my doubts, but I hung onto their words, the same words I had offered many clients in my counseling practice. At one point, I wrote the following: "Grace, a fleeting whisper that God is here! Here... where the darkness is not the friend it once was. Grace, a flash of light, daring the darkness, shouting hope." Somehow, I held onto hope even in my darkest moments. Thoughts of suicide were still my dark companion. Because I had become aware of depression in my family heritage, I was determined not to leave suicide as a legacy...no matter how great the pain.

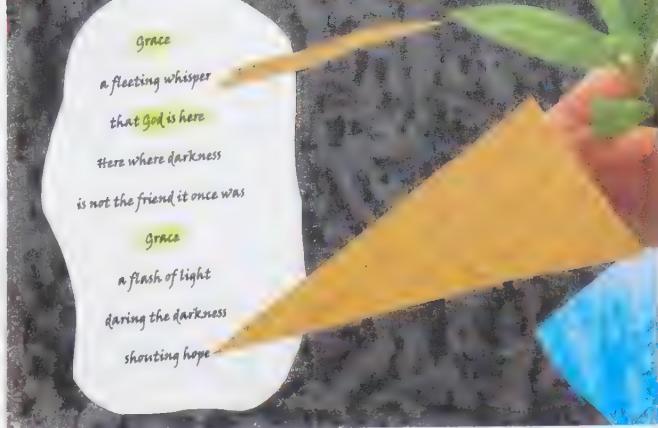
At the treatment center I experienced the patient encouragement of my therapists and spiritual guides, informed support from the psychiatrist and clinical staff, the openness and kindness of those around me and caring love from the few members of my congregation aware of my condition. In my shame and silence, by not letting others know of my depression, I cut off the possibility of support from other congregation members and friends. And...I continued bound in that hole of depression.

MY STORY: PART III

Nothing was changing. I couldn't stand it. I kept telling myself that if God wanted me to live the rest of my life in darkness, God would have to give me the grace to bear it. Not my will but God's! Sometimes I blamed myself. For years, I'd been saying the prayer of St. Ignatius: "Take, Lord, receive all my liberty...." Maybe God was calling in the chips! Strange thoughts went through my head, completely contrary to what I believe about our loving, compassionate, and merciful God.

There was one last treatment that the psychiatrist had suggested and I had resisted for months. Probably one of the most difficult decisions I ever made was agreeing to undergo electric convulsive therapy (ECT). Even though I had been trained as a counselor, emotionally I bought into all the myths surrounding this treatment.

I discussed the process and ramifications of ECT with my doctor and consulted a specialist. We agreed I was a good candidate for the treatment and



set a date to begin: October 17, 2014. Slowly, with each treatment, the fog lifted a bit. ECT was the key to the miracle for which I and so many others were praying.

By the second week of November, I could feel, I could pray, I could sing, I could smile and laugh. The gift of tears had always been a special grace and now I could cry after a "dry spell" of more than a year. The Geri I knew was back! Three lines of an E.E. Cummings' poem kept/keep coming back to me: "i thank You god for most this amazing day... i who have died am alive again today... now the ears of my ears are awake and now the eyes of my eyes are opened."

Was I cured? Statistics indicate that with each episode of depression a person experiences, the probability of another episode increases. Aware of this fact, my treatment program provides for ongoing support, encouraging those who have successfully completed treatment to return regularly for three days over a period of five years. It also encourages the person to choose a local support group to meet monthly and share one's ongoing goals and progress. Also essential are all the things anyone does to maintain physical, spiritual and emotional health: eat healthy foods; exercise; maintain connections with God, family and friends; do things one enjoys; get enough sleep; avoid unnecessary stress, etc. In addition, given my experience, it is important for me to touch base regularly with a psychiatrist and a counselor, take necessary medication and be on the alert for any danger signs or symptoms I experience.

Once again, I feel alive; my joy and energy have returned. When windows close, God opens doors. After nine months of training at the Milwaukee Art Museum, I received my certification as a docent in June 2016. This is a new ministry for me. The opportunity to share - especially with children in the Milwaukee school system - the beauty of art, and the struggles and successes of artists throughout many times and cultures is challenging, exciting and rewarding.

At profession, we Dominicans ask for the mercy of God and of each other. My congregation has extended to me mercy, love and support beyond anything I could have asked or imagined. For that, and for the deeper compassion with which my experience of depression has gifted me, I am grateful beyond words.

The warning signs and symptoms of depression are many and differ for adults, infants, children, adolescents and the elderly. It is imperative that we become aware of these signs and symptoms, especially in the case of adolescents who often do not communicate their feelings and mask their depression in a variety of ways. Our awareness and attention to persons in the grip of depression may be the life-line they need.

My prayer is that - with advancement in the science of mental health, an increase in knowledge and understanding of depression by families, friends and the public - many more sufferers of depression will be able to join me in the following hymn of gratitude:

i thank You God for most this amazing day: for the leaping greenly spirits of trees and a blue true dream of sky; and for everything which is natural which is infinite which is yes (i who have died am alive again today, and this is the sun's birthday; this is the birth day of life and of love and wings: and of the gay great happening illimitably earth)

*how should tasting touching hearing seeing
breathing any-lifted from the no
of all nothing-human merely being
doubt unimaginable You?*

*(now the ears of my ears awake and
now the eyes of my eyes are opened)*

e.e. cummings 1894-1962

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION

Sister Geri's story of coming out of deep, dark depression cannot help but resonate with every one of us. We may not have clinical depression but we have patterns of addiction or anger, etc.

1. Did you identify with her pain and the desire for light and peace? How have you found peace? Was it perhaps through a supportive friendship or community?
2. Have you accompanied others in such challenges – often over many years, even decades? Do you think Christ Himself in His human nature may have known depression?



ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Geraldine (Geri) Kline, OP is a member of the Ximénez Dominican Congregation, and lives in a Dominican community in Milwaukee, WI. Geri has ministered in education, congregation formation, and province leadership. During ten years on mission in Bolivia, she founded DIFASITE (difasite.com.bo), a program of assistance for women and children, victims of abuse, violence and abandonment. For 15 years, Geri ministered as a Licensed Professional Counselor in San Antonio/Tx, both at the Catholic Counseling Center and in private practice. Her experience in Bolivia and counseling contact with LGBTQIA clients has deepened her commitment to social justice issues. Geri is a certified Tai Chi Chik instructor and currently volunteers as a docent at the Milwaukee Art Museum. She is especially interested in helping to remove the stigma attached to mental illness.



A PRAYERFUL REFLECTION FOR DEEPER COMMUNION IN AND WITH CHRIST'S RISEN BODY, THE CHURCH

Mass, John Zorn

INTRODUCTION

Christ is our priest and the Lamb of our salvation. He intercedes for us that we may all be one with each other and abide in the communion He shares with the Father and the Holy Spirit.

Christ our head prays in us and through us as members of His Body which has suffered death and is now glorified. All our prayers are spoken by one same breath of His Risen peace flowing through us.

We pray to Christ as the Son of God with gratitude and thanksgiving, praise and sorrow, trusting He indeed prays one prayer of love through us all.

Martha and Mary, Jacob and Esau, Cain and Able, Peter and Paul.

One body. One spirit:

Amen!

1. CALLED TO COMMUNION

“It is not good for man to be alone...” From the beginning of Genesis, through Revelation, it is clear God created us for communion and calls us to ever greater intimacy with him and each other through “life-calling” or vocation.

The call of God as it came to Abraham, Moses and all the prophets was never solely for their own personal benefit but was always a vocational summons for the spiritual well-being of others, to build up the people of God.

Consider any (or all) of the following vocational calls:

- Abram (Genesis 12:1-3)
- Moses (Exodus 3:4-10)
- Gideon (Judges 6:11-14)
- Samuel (I Samuel 3:1-10)
- Isaiah (Isaiah 6:1-8)
- The Suffering Servant (Isaiah 49:1-6)
- Jeremiah (Jeremiah 1:4-10)
- Mary (Luke 1:26-38)
- Peter (Luke 5:1-11)
- Paul (Acts 9:1-9)

As the Lord revealed himself to each of these people, He made it clear that this blessing was a gift to be shared. Looking at your own life-vocation (marriage, single life, priestly service, religious life) do you see how your vocation has involved others? (Consider with gratitude those whose influence shaped you and those formed and shaped by your word and example.)

Do you ever think about the “vocation” within your vocation? – (For example living with chronic illness, within marriage and family or stages of our life’s work and letting go for the next phase.)

Have you ever thought explicitly about yourself as an instrument of the Church and a representative of the Church?

In your prayer and ministry are you conscious of the gifts and needs of the Universal Church and all the people whose prayer, sacrifice and witness sustain us all in every time and place?

Is the “Amen” I pray at the reception of communion a full and joyful affirmation of the Lord’s presence not only in the Eucharistic species but also in His entire Body – that is, every member of the Church? Is it also an Amen of acceptance of all the realities of my life and my vocation as gift and blessing?

2. WOUNDED HEALERS

Often those we love very deeply hurt us, sometimes intentionally, but most often not deliberately. This can certainly be true of all our relationships “in Christ” and “in the Church.”

Consider:

- The pain of Thomas in John 20:24-29
- Paul’s struggles as he bares his soul (II Corinthians 4:7-18; 6:1-13; 7:1-2; 12:7-18) and also Galatians 6:17 and Colossians 1:24-29

When the wounded yet Risen Lord met “Doubting Thomas,” Thomas experienced reconciliation with the Lord and “re-integration” with the community. Have I ever felt I didn’t “belong” to the Church because of certain teachings or practices expected by the Church? Have I ever felt ostracized or excluded by certain people in the Church? Have I been able to forgive them? Do I pray for the grace to love them? Do I ever exclude others?

St. Paul carried within himself a loving concern for the unity of the Church. He understood his own “wounds” as sharing with Christ in the on-going healing/salvation of the Church. Do I see my own struggles with Church as a means of intercession for my own salvation and that of others as well?

Do I pray for those “wounded” by the Church – abused sexually or perhaps scarred by the angry or harsh treatment of someone in authority or marginalized for their theological opinions or pastoral practice? Do I ask

God's forgiveness for those I have led astray by my words or deeds?

Do I pray for the grace of a conversion to what St. Ignatius of Loyola would call "thinking with the mind and heart of the Church?"

3. RECONCILED AND RECONCILING

The celebration of the Holy Eucharist makes present the reconciliation for which Christ died and was raised; as the New Adam, He died and was raised that we might become a "new creation," at peace with the Heavenly Father and one another. We live the "real presence" and give flesh and blood to His reconciling presence in our words and deeds and by our silent commitment to non-violence.

Consider:

- Matthew 5:21-26, 38-48
- I Corinthians 11:17-22, 28-34
- James 2:1-8
- Isaiah 58:6-10
- Micah 6:8; Isaiah 66:1-2 and Matthew 25:31-46

What anger do I carry in my heart toward anyone? Can I try to express my sorrow? Who might find me a stumbling block or obstacle to prayer and ministry? Do I pray for the healing and peace of all who may be suffering because of my attitude, words or deeds?

Do I love "the poor" and those who can do nothing for me? Do I consider it a privilege to serve and share with them?

Do I pray for all leaders of Church and state, even those who are a source of frustration or disappointment? How do the sufferings and needs of others impact my prayer: do I see their faces and needs as looks to encounter Christ?

Do I see the close connection between worship of the Lord and care for the least of my brothers and sisters?

4. A SHARING OF GIFTS

"Communion" – literally - means "sharing of gifts." These gifts are material as well as spiritual blessings and talents.

Two times in the Act of the Apostles as St. Luke describes the early Church, he notes that they devoted themselves to the teaching of the apostles and the communal life (sharing all in common) and the breaking of the bread. St. Paul saw the collection for the Church in Jerusalem as an essential part of his ministry in Greece; in the same way, spiritual gifts were to be shared.

Consider:

- Acts 2:42-47 and 4:32-35
- II Corinthians 8:1-15; 9:1-15
- I Corinthians 12:1-11

Communion is the fruit of self-sacrifice. Am I generous with the spiritual and material gifts God has given me?

How am I supporting the ministries of Word, Worship and Service?

Do I affirm the gifts of others?

Can I step aside to allow the next generation to accept leadership?

Do I pray for vocations to all aspects of Church life and ministry?

Do I understand stewardship of talents and resources as a vital part of maintaining communion?

Am I a good receiver as well as a giver?

5. CELEBRATING OUR IDENTITY AS SHARERS IN ONE BODY

Salvation celebrates wholeness; God's presence emerges as we set aside self-preoccupations and recognize we are incomplete without all our brothers and sisters.



Our eternal salvation is depicted in the Scriptures as a communal celebration, a banquet for all.

Consider:

- Isaiah 25:6-8
- Mark 2:1-12
- John 15: 1-8, John 17:20-26
- Romans 12:3-20
- Philippians 2:1-4, 12-18
- I John 1:1-4
- Revelation 7:7-17

Do I believe that my salvation is truly interwoven with the spiritual being of every person around me?

Am I a “team” player, seeking the fulfillment of all or do I seek my own glory and recognition?

As in the story in Mark 2 when four friends carry the paralytic to Jesus, have you ever joined others and “carried” someone to the Lord? How did it change you? Who has “carried” you along the path of salvation thus far?

How do I respect, celebrate and affirm the unique roles, gifts and needs of my brothers and sisters in community?

How might I show more concretely my appreciation of each one's particular gifts?

Do I pray for the unity of all Christians and for unity among all people of good will?

Do I realize that I cannot be bound to Jesus unless I am also sharing life with every member of His Body?

How do I celebrate God's glory as an inter-active gift in which we all share?

What is my vision of eternal life and how does that image or dream impact my prayer and action here and now?

CONCLUSION

How can I keep from singing? You have planted within my heart the desire and ability to love; may I trust that the natural attraction which draws me out of my own fears and pride is your way of letting me know and understand your mysterious presence and love. Save me and all people as we experience your presence, Lord Jesus. May we recognize that we are all held by you in the bosom of the Father's eternal love. In times of joy and sorrow, I pray and sing with the breath of your Holy Spirit drawing us all to share your life together forever. Amen.

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